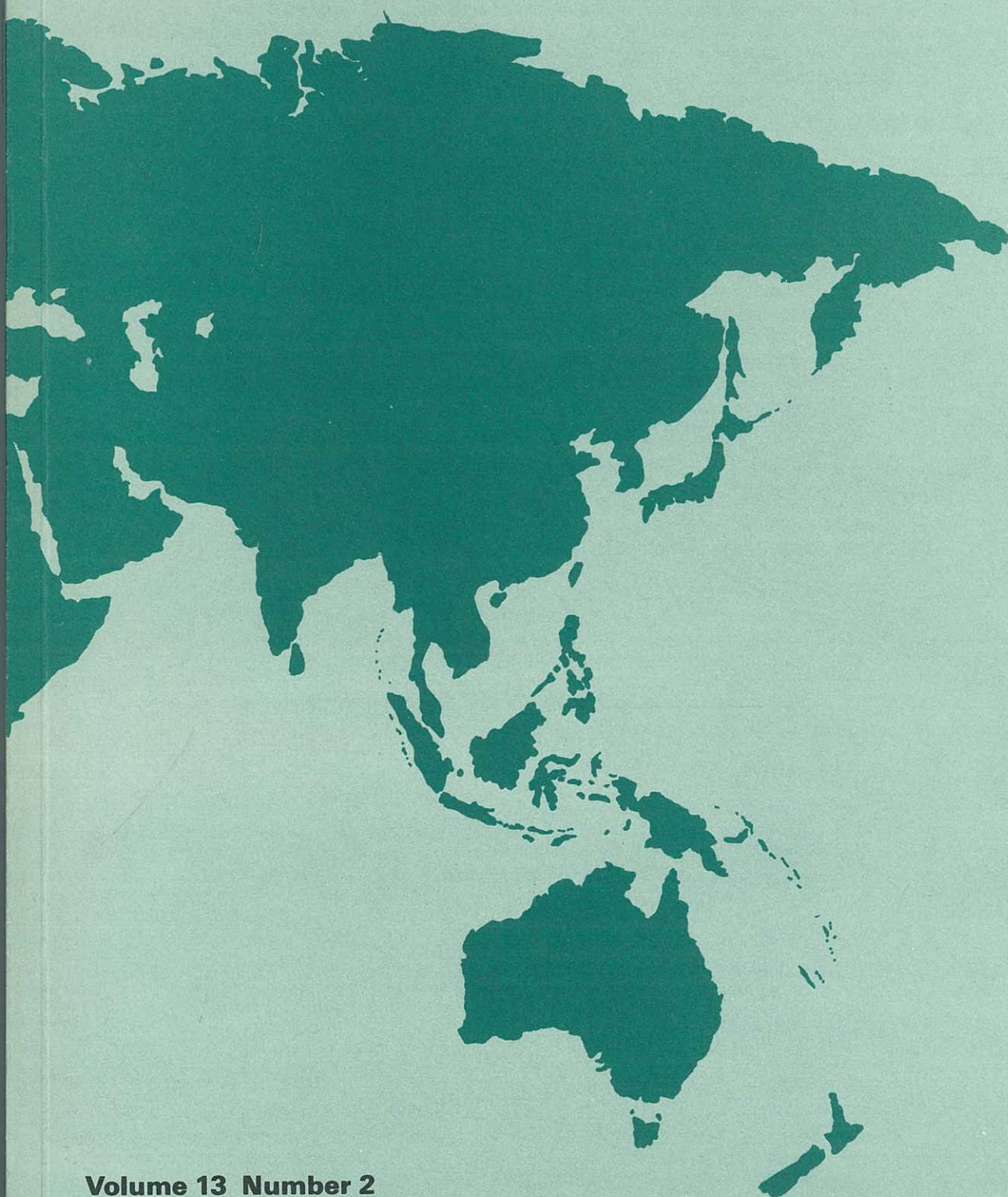


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British states. The paper will prove of value to both students and teachers, and certainly raises points for further speculation

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Nancy Eberhardt, ed, *Gender, Power, and the Construction of the Moral Order: Studies from the Thai Periphery*, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Monograph 4, 1988. Introduction, bibliography, 100 pp.

In introducing this collection of four studies on the place of women in ethnic minority groups on the Thai geographical and political periphery, Nancy Eberhardt states that the articles have been given relevance by recent anthropological discussions on the influence of Theravada Buddhist values on the status of Thai women. Unfortunately, this particular issue is not touched upon in any of the articles, and it appears that in making her statement Eberhardt has been somewhat at a loss to find a common analytical theme to link the four articles. For indeed, the three societies discussed in these papers —the tribal Akha, the expatriate Yunnanese Chinese or Hor, and the Shan—are as different from each other as each, in turn, is different from the dominant lowland Thai society. However, the lack of a unifying theme in this small collection does not detract from the particular insights provided by each author.

Jane Hanks's account of life in a Akha village in Northern Thailand in the 1960s ('The Power of Akha Women') is primarily descriptive. However, her study has particular interest in providing a point of historical contrast to Cornelia Kammerer's more analytical article ('Shifting Asymmetries Among Akha in Northern Thailand'). Kammerer describes the deteriorating position of Akha women in their own society consequent upon the intrusive impact of central Thai economic and political influences in recent decades. Kammerer shows that with the expansion of central Thai political and economic influences over the Akha —manifested, in among other ways, by the imposition of such lowland Thai institutions as the village head-man—the role of men in Akha society has been enhanced to the detriment of Akha women. Kammerer also notes that, with the general impoverishment of the Akha as the pattern of their traditional economy has been disturbed, fewer families have been able to afford the costly tribal ceremony at which older Akha women are conferred the high status symbol of a white skirt. The conferring of a white skirt upon older Akha women has traditionally symbolised their accession to a realm of tribal authority and seniority on a par with that of male elders. Kammerer reports that fewer of these 'white skirt women' are to be found in the Akha villages of Northern Thailand today, and that as a consequence male Akha elders are now being turned to more than in the past for the kinds of ritualistic, advisory and adjudicatory duties which were traditionally performed by elder tribal women.

Ann Hill's study ('Women Without Talents are Virtuous') of the Hor minority in Northern Thailand, an ethnic Chinese group which fled to Thailand from Yunnan after the Communist revolution in China in 1949, has thematic parallels with Kammerer's study of the Akha. Both authors describe how the impact of lowland Thai society and politics has led to a relative reduction of emphasis on the values traditionally accorded women in some Northern Thai ethnic minority groups and has, in the case of the Hor, increased the social restrictions placed upon ethnic women. Hill shows that the position of the expatriate Hor in Thailand, as refugees and stateless persons who are denied access to the Thai bureaucracy and polity, has forced Hor communities back onto themselves and led to a re-emphasis of traditional

Confucian values in an attempt to maintain community solidarity in a hostile environment. For expatriate Hor women in Thailand this has meant a strict enforcement of tabus proscribing their participation in the world outside the home, which in turn has seriously inhibited their ability to adapt to the economic and socio-political milieu of Northern Thailand.

Of the four articles in this collection, Nancy Eberhardt's paper ('Siren Song: Negotiating Gender Images in a Rural Shan Village') on a minority Tai speaking group, the Shan, potentially has the greatest relevance to the broader study of the place of women in lowland Thai society. By focusing on an exceptional individual woman Eberhardt is able to begin unravelling the symbolic ambiguities that Shan women must 'negotiate' in order to establish a place of respect and authority in their own society. Eberhardt studies a famed female singer of a difficult genre of traditional Shan songs, whose acknowledged linguistic skill is accorded multiple and conflicting interpretations by her fellow villagers. The woman's skill is variously attributed to her possession of a great store of *kammic* merit and, alternatively, to her collusion with evil spiritual powers, a supposed collusion which villagers regard as giving her dangerous Siren-like powers over young men. Eberhardt shows that independently-minded Shan women are often placed in a no-win situation, being ascribed negative attributes by their male and female peers when they express their skills and opinions in ways that transgress the role limitations traditionally imposed upon Shan women.

While the societies studied and the issues raised in this small collection of papers are diverse, the articles by four professional female anthropologists provide a useful resource for readers interested in case studies on the place of women in the traditional societies of upland Southeast Asia. Two of the articles, those by Kammerer and Hill, also provide insights on the impact that lowland Thai society is having upon the status of women among the minority groups living in Northern Thailand.

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Pira Sudham, *Monsoon Country*, Shire Books, Bangkok, 1988., 236 pp. Paper: npg

Pira Sudham is one of the few contemporary Thai authors writing in English and his novels provide rare insights into the attitudes that Thais hold about their own society. Pira's most recent novel, *Monsoon Country*, is structured in the form of a biography of Prem Surin, a son of a poor Northeastern Thai farming family. The reader follows Prem Surin from his birth through his primary education in the village school, his move to Bangkok to undertake secondary studies and his period in England as a scholarship holder. Pira concludes his novel with Prem Surin's anticlimactic return to his home village after many years absence.

Underpinning this simple biographical format Pira Sudham develops a thematic description of the conflicts within contemporary Thai society. Pira portrays these conflicts in terms of a struggle between knowledge and justice, on the one hand, and ignorance and evil, on the other. This struggle is manifested explicitly in *Monsoon Country* in the relations between villagers and their 'Lords', the representatives of Central Thai authority who buy

the villagers' votes at election time and who punish all expressions of dissent between elections. The struggle between the light of knowledge, and of the liberation that it can bring, and the darkness of ignorance, and the persistence of evil that it permits, also takes place in the mind of Pira's main character, Prem Surin.

Prem Surin attempts to find his own liberation through education, in the hope that one day he may be able to apply that understanding to help his family and fellow villagers break free from the evils of official corruption and exploitation by local rice traders. However, Prem lacks any clear practical plan apart from his ideal of attaining knowledge. He also lacks confidence, all the time doubting the value of his efforts to achieve change and improvement through education. In the character of Prem Surin *Monsoon Country* presents a picture of the self-doubt which the stratification of a traditional society may instill in the members of the 'inferior' classes, a self-doubt which inhibits even those rural people who do obtain access to the empowering benefits of education from taking full advantage of the opportunities presented to them in the modernising urban society of Thailand. Pira Sudham describes well the paralysis of will generated among Thai villagers by the combined oppressive force of climatic, economic and political pressures. While showing the villagers' astute understanding of their situation, Pira also shows their inability to apply this understanding to achieve any improvement, and their ultimate resignation to the darkness of their lives and their desire simply to be left alone to suffer by themselves with their own kind, undisturbed by the outside world.

From a literary perspective, however, *Monsoon Country* is a disappointing novel. The plot is at times disjointed with seemingly unrelated events impinging on the development of the story. The author also assumes that his reader possesses a detailed knowledge of the society, culture and contemporary history of Thailand. While those familiar with Thailand will have no difficulty following the development of Pira's story, the general reader is likely to be left at a loss to understand certain of the subtleties of the novel's plot. Furthermore, Pira's characterisation on the whole is not strong. While the story of *Monsoon Country* unfolds from within the minds of Pira's characters, by and large these characters remain mere empty vessels. The reader is made aware of the humanity of the country boy, Prem Surin, and those around him but our sympathy is restricted by our ignorance of what drives these characters. Pira does not open up the hearts and minds of his characters to us. He has not taken advantage of the literary medium to provide his non-Thai readers with an opportunity temporarily to put aside the disconcerting sense of being an alien, an outsider to the world of Prem Surin, by enabling us to go beyond the superficial observation of human suffering and conflict to divine the inner depths of the Thai soul. The reader remains a foreign visitor in Pira's novel, the key to the depths of his characters' beings is not provided. Pira's prose is simple and lucid and he is well-skilled in crafting the English language to the purpose of describing his homeland. However, he has not yet mastered the skill of constructing a novel as a well-formed discursive entity.

Despite its limitations as a piece of literature, *Monsoon Country* has value from a sociological perspective in placing a human face on the issues associated with rural development in Thailand. However, Pira Sudham presents no solutions to the problems that he describes and his message in *Monsoon Country* is not optimistic. All of his characters who dare to use their knowledge to take a stand against either the local or national orders of evil are either killed, vilified or forced in the end to succumb to the dull stupid forces of tradition, corruption and exploitation. Pira shows us no models of the liberator or saviour and leaves the reader wiser but with the same issues which opened the story of the life of Prem Surin, issues clarified but unresolved, stated but unanswered. The root of Pira's novel is a fundamental questioning of the value of any form of development or change in rural

Thailand, and it is this confronting conclusion which has the most lasting impact on the reader of *Monsoon Country*.

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Patrick J.N. Tuck, *French Catholic Missionaries and the Politics of Imperialism in Vietnam, 1857-1915: A Documentary Survey*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1987. 352pp. Introduction, appendixes, biographical notes, maps. Npg.

This is the first book in English to concentrate on dealings between the French colonial administration and French missionaries in Vietnam. It draws on the archives of the Société des Missions Étrangères (SME) in Paris — the sole French missionary order operating in the country — and presents some 300 pages of documents translated from the French. These are arranged in a chronological sequence of six chapters with introductory historical sketches and further bibliographical details. As well as providing a handy teaching aid that could be used to acquaint undergraduate historians with problems of collating and interpreting primary sources, the *Survey* thus tells a well organised story.

By concentrating its attention on the missions in the most important period of French expansion into Vietnam, 1857-1914, the *Survey* takes us into territory which other works — in French and English — have not explored fully. In fact, Tuck's work now gives us a clearer idea of how missionary activity helped to establish France's imperial interests in Vietnam, even though there was a 'pattern of recriminations' between the missions and the colonial administration.

The documents on the official Cochinchina Commission set up in Paris in 1857 show how French government and missionary interests converged at this time. French missionaries wanted protection from the persecutions which their meddling in local affairs had caused, and the French government wanted some justification for the aggressive policy of colonisation it was formulating in a country where 'sugar and rice are cultivated in great quantity'. By the time Admiral Rigault de Genouilly occupied the Saigon citadel with a view to setting up an agricultural colony in 1859, he justified his action with the argument that Catholics were being persecuted by the court of Annam, that his motivation was 'primarily religious'.

Yet Genouilly's high motives were not reflected in the colonial administration's relations with the Catholic missionaries. In February 1860, Monsignor Lefevre, Bishop of Haupolis, Vicar Apostolic of West Cochinchina, wrote in report to his superiors in Paris that 'unfortunately all those who were sent at the head of this expedition are people who regard religion as a secondary matter.' Meanwhile, the colonial administrators continued to complain about the missionaries. In 1862 when the Admirals were too occupied to think of conquests beyond Cochinchina, Admiral Bonard was warning his superiors in Paris that serious political complications could arise from the political activities of the missionaries who were 'veritable trouble makers' trying to overthrow the Vietnamese emperor in Hue.

Nevertheless, the missionaries still had their political-military uses. For example, in the late 1870s and early 1880s, when the French were preparing for the final annexation of