



Justin Thomas McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*

The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand by
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MCDANIEL, JUSTIN THOMAS. *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 327 pp. \$60.00 (cloth).

Thailand is commonly understood as a “Theravada Buddhist” country—indeed, the most populous one in the world today. Such a description suggests conformity to a standardized set of beliefs and religious practices, which are anchored, in turn, to a commonly recognized set of canonical texts. The task of understanding Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, therefore, ought to be based, first, on an understanding of these scriptures. Religious beliefs and practices can then be judged from the standpoint of how closely they conform to the canonical scriptures. This approach has led scholars of Buddhism in Thailand to concern themselves with questions relating to canonicity, the origins of various religious traditions (the older the tradition, the more authentic), the identification and assigning of religious ideas and practices to separate categories of “Theravada Buddhism,” “Mahayana Buddhism,” “Hinduism,” “animism,” and so forth. The reception of religious traditions is described in terms of “localization,” “hybridization,” or “syncretism.” Generally speaking, this has been the framework in which much of the existing Western study of Buddhism in Thailand has been carried out. It is this framework that Justin Thomas McDaniel seeks to overturn in his highly provocative book *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*.

In the world of Thai Buddhism that McDaniel describes, the canonical scriptures are only one element of a complex, heterogeneous, ever-changing religious cacophony of vengeful ghosts, charismatic monks, protective amulets, incantations conveying supernatural powers, personal child ghost servants, magical corpse oil, tree spirits, *yantras*, continually changing rituals and liturgies, and a pantheon of gods, Buddhas, bodhisattvas, deities, and ancestral spirits. McDaniel even questions whether it makes any sense to use the term “Theravada Buddhism” to refer to the contemporary religious scene in Thailand at all. Instead, he uses the concept “religious repertoires” to make sense of a religious sphere that seems to defy systematic description. By “repertoire” is meant “a constantly shifting collection of gestures, objects, texts, plots, tropes, ethical maxims, precepts, ritual movements, and expectations” (225). What’s more, these repertoires differ from person to person, and they may be “internally inconsistent.” For McDaniel, “There is no core of Thai Buddhism” (15). Rather than striving for nirvana or strictly adhering to religious precepts, many Thais experience this religious repertoire as directed toward achieving “security, heritage, graciousness, and abundance” (15). As McDaniel himself admits, his scholarly training in Indic philology and history had blinded him to what Thai Buddhism means for many, if not most, Thai Buddhists. His book is an attempt to redress this problem.

McDaniel pursues his argument by hinging the book on a detailed study of a subject that has been almost totally overlooked by scholars of Thai Buddhism: Thailand’s most famous ghost story, the tale of Mae Nak and the charismatic monk, Somdet To, who was able to exorcise that ghost. The story, which originally dates from the mid-nineteenth century, has been retold in countless different forms—radio plays, TV programs, and movies, including *Nang Nak*, the international hit movie of 1999, directed by Nonzee Nimibut.

The book is divided into four parts: “Monks and Kings”; “Texts and Magic”; “Rituals and Liturgies”; and “Art and Objects.” The result is not only a convincing argument about the limitations of existing studies of Thai Buddhism but also an extremely rich empirical study of contemporary religious practice in Thailand. The reader will find detailed discussions of aspects of Thai religion that are to be found nowhere else in the English-language literature. For example, McDaniel gives the

most complete description of the story of the famous female ghost, Mae Nak, and the extraordinary cult that surrounds her. He provides the fullest account yet of the life of the charismatic nineteenth-century monk Somdet To and the plethora of legends, rituals, practices, texts, and religious objects that have grown up around his memory. According to McDaniel, Somdet To is “central to the history of Buddhism in Thailand” (26) and is the exemplary figure for contemporary Buddhists. Somdet To is also the most popular figure in Thailand’s huge market in Buddhist amulets. This gives McDaniel the opportunity to discuss the thriving amulet trade, which has often been dismissed on the grounds of its supposed “commercialization” of Buddhism or because of its association with “materialism,” as opposed to the supposed otherworldly emphasis of “real” Buddhism. As McDaniel points out, anyone who wants to understand Buddhism in Thailand today—or, indeed, historically—cannot ignore the importance of material objects. McDaniel also analyzes what he regards as Thailand’s most widely recognized religious text, the Pali *Chinabanchorn katha*. This was the text used by Somdet To to exorcise the ghost of Mae Nak. Today the text is known by heart by almost all monks and nuns, as well as by many lay Buddhists. There are even “chanting clubs” dedicated to memorizing and chanting the text. The fifteen-verse text is neither canonical nor foreign but apparently of Thai origin. And rather than encapsulating Buddhist concepts of nonattachment or overcoming suffering, the text is an incantation designed to provide protection from danger. Indeed, in contrast to Buddhism’s peaceful image, the verses of the *Chinabanchorn katha* have a martial quality to them.

Another intriguing argument McDaniel develops is that, due to Thailand’s capitalist expansion and globalizing economy (it is the most successful of the Theravada countries), there has been a gradual “recentering” of Theravada Buddhism, away from its origins in Sri Lanka and India or even Burma, and toward Thailand. From there, Thai Buddhism is reexported to South Asia and Southeast Asia. This accounts both for the relative lack of concern in Thailand to conform to an “authentic” Buddhism from outside and for the abundance of new “Thai” Buddhist practices.

McDaniel brings many strengths to the book. He reads Pali, Thai, and French and has spent years in the monkhood in Thailand. He is part textual scholar, part historian, part anthropologist, and part scholar of popular culture. He is also a skilled writer; the book is a pleasure to read. This is an important book—certainly the most important to come out of studies of Thai Buddhism for many years. It will likely have an impact well outside this field.

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KRIPAL, JEFFREY J. *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 370 pp. \$29.00 (cloth).

Some years ago, in the course of fieldwork research, I found myself in a Mumbai slum discussing *Conan the Barbarian* (1982). My interlocutor had caught a screening somewhere in town of the Arnold Schwarzenegger movie. His translation of the title into Hindu terms as *Konarak*, after the famous temple complex in Orissa, foreshadowed his final statement on the spectacle. It had evidently made a strong impression: “Do you know what that film is really about?” he pressed me. “It’s about God.”

Conan is one of the many muscular luminaries of twentieth-century American geek culture to make an appearance in Jeffrey J. Kripal’s new book, *Mutants and Mystics*, a playful, provocative, and eccentric excavation of mystical tropes and themes in comic books and allied genres. Wonder-workers from the skies; humble subjects marked for epic destinies; dueling master plans of light and dark—connections be-