

Title: “Understanding Thai Buddhism through contemporary literature”

Convener: Paul McBain

Description:

The study of Buddhism as a religion and of Thai literature have tended to lead separate lives. There are nevertheless many novelists, film-makers and poets who make use of Buddhist symbols, narratives, ideology and language in their work. This panel will discuss ways in which we can query such Buddhist-inflected references in order to make sense of Thai approaches to politics, modernity, sexuality and time as they are represented in literature. The papers presented will focus on particular works of literature and authors, analyzing the ways in which a fuller understanding of Buddhist language, contemporary debates and developments (both local and global) in Buddhism can be used to gain a deeper understanding of that material and, by extension, contemporary Thai Buddhism itself. The papers presented will show that the study of contemporary Thai literature reveals Thai Buddhism to be not merely a static tradition or belief but a constantly re-negotiated, politically-involved facet of life and thought in contemporary Thailand. We will also discuss ways in which Buddhist-inflected tellings of time and gender, amongst other things, present new possibilities for making sense of particularly modern problems. Some questions that the panelists might consider include:

- How is Buddhism deployed as a key ‘tradition’ in literature and art that must be preserved against the onslaught of foreignness and commercialism?
- How, alternatively, can it be used to critique such nationalist or neo-traditionalist perspectives?

- How do conflicts about what Buddhism should and should not be in the modern world manifest in literature and how are these related to contemporary politics?
- Can 'Buddhism' as a category of analysis reveal negotiate between the 'local' and 'global' in understanding Thai interpretations of the present and politics?
- Do Buddhist-inflected tellings of time and space present new conceptual possibilities for dealing with uniquely modern problems, such as environmental issues?

Keywords: Contemporary Buddhism, Thai Buddhism, Thai literature,

Panelists:

Chair: Justin McDaniel of the University of Pennsylvania.

Rachel Harrison of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.

Arnika Fuhrmann of Cornell University.

Chairat Polmuk of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

Paul McBain, a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania.

Contributors and their relevance to this panel

Professor Justin McDaniel has written widely on understanding Thai Buddhism via popular stories, myths, paintings and rumor. His book *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* (2011) looked at Thai Buddhism through the myth of the ghost Mae Nak and the semi-legendary monk Somdet To. His article 'The Bird in the Painting' advocated for using single aesthetic objects – such as a bird in a temple mural - as an 'organizing principle' for the study of Buddhism, revealing in many cases what is affective and appealing about Buddhism more diversely than more scriptural or art historical approaches. He has long promoted understanding Thai Buddhism via vernacular, aesthetic material and is the perfect chair for this panel.

Professor Arnika Fuhrmann's first book *Ghostly Desires* (2016) examined contemporary Thai film together in conjunction with sexual politics. Her study argued that the character of these films and their eroticization in the spheres of loss and death represents an improvisation on the Buddhist disavowal of attachment and highlights under-recognized female and queer desire and persistence. She has recently completed a book which investigates how the Thai poet Angkarn Kallayanapong adapted Buddhist concepts of time to create a modern Asian aesthetic imaginary. Her use of sophisticated theory to analyze Buddhist tellings of time and how these inform explorations of sexuality and space will make her an insightful contributor to this panel. Her paper for this panel will investigate the connection between the Thai poet Angkarn Kallayanapong and the American poet Allen Ginsberg in order to shed light on transnationally prevalent critiques of US empire during the Cold War. She is interested particularly in Mahayana Buddhism's ability to underwrite progressive political agendas.

Professor Rachel Harrison has written widely on contemporary Thai literature, publishing articles on important feminist authors such as Sri Dao Ruang and on early Thai novels such as that of Khru Liam. She has edited *Disturbing Conventions* (2014) and *The Ambiguous Allure of the West* (2010), both of which queried how Thailand or Thai literature should be understood as neither national nor global, neither fully indigenous but still representing unique standpoints, experiences and perspectives. Her work on this will be relevant to discussions of thinking of Buddhism as potentially a category which can disturb the binaries of local and global when thinking of Southeast Asian literature.

Doctor Chairat Polmuk has written extensively on Buddhism and film in Thailand. His dissertation focused on how Southeast Asian artists and activists alike bring a Buddhist-derived notion of ephemeral mediation or a 'Buddhist archival impulse,' to bear on the corruptions of materiality, temporality, and affect in artistic practices and oppositional politics. His work with contemporary Thai artists such as Pratchaya Phinthong has led to research on small Buddhist press houses in Northeast Thailand which still publish local *jātaka* (stories of the Buddha's past lives) literature. His contact with local Thai artists and publishers in particular will help to ground the conversation in contemporary artistic and activist circles.

Doctor Paul McBain wrote his dissertation about Sunthorn Phu, the 'Shakespeare of Thailand,' and how his travel poetry can give us a window into how poets and kings landscaped early

Bangkok, in Phu's case describing it as a Buddhist kingdom in a state of decline. For this panel, he shall give a talk on *The Story of Jan Dara* (1964), an acclaimed and infamous novel by Utsana Phloengtham. Understood with reference to the modernist tropes it employs and the debates in Buddhist cosmology and morality at the time of writing, it can be shown to be a scathing indictment of old-fashioned moralistic 'hypocrites' who practice decadent lives 'while mouthing the Buddhist precepts.' This talk will show how focusing on the Buddhist elements in a literary work – in this case, different ideas of 'birth' – can reveal the close ties of Buddhism in Thailand to conservative ideas of social order as well as how one author was able to use alternative interpretations of Buddhism to critique and challenge those ideas.