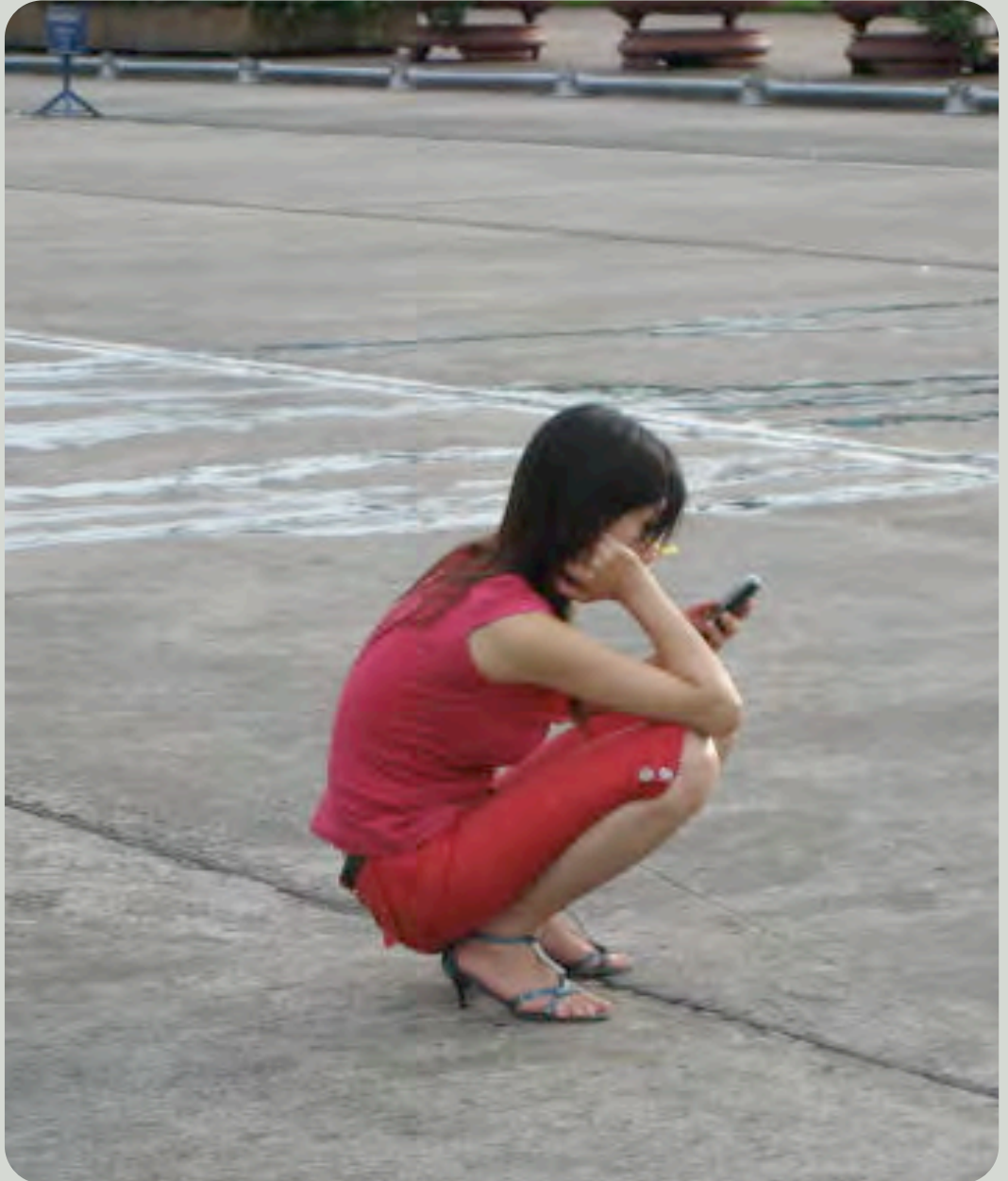


# EXPLORATIONS

a graduate student journal of southeast asian studies

**Volume 8 Spring 2008**



Texting from the Mausoleum, Hanoi | Maggie Bodemer

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# Rebranding the Buddhist Faith:

Reformist Buddhism and Piety in Contemporary Singapore

CHIA MENG TAT JACK & CHEE MING FENG ROBIN

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## Introduction

*It was a Sunday morning at a religious organization in Singapore. A young teenage boy, perhaps 15 or 16 years of age, was happily singing and clapping his hands. He seemed to have been enjoying himself very much. The worship leader then led the congregation into a word of prayer. The boy, together with other members of the congregation, put their hands together and prayed for love and compassion to fill the world.*

This scene could be set in almost any Christian church, but the fact that it occurred in June 2007 in a Buddhist organization in Singapore might be surprising for many people since contemporary discourses on the practice of Buddhism in Singapore have continued to be presented in its “traditional” sense by representing the spiritual realities of “traditional Buddhists” through promulgation of ritualistic piety and reverence in their quotidian religious rituals and practices including prayer chants using prayer beads and wooden fish,

as well as their regular participation in funeral rituals. However, Buddhism in the country has undergone constant organizational, structural and spiritual transformation, particularly over the past two decades. More attention is therefore needed to understand this brand of “New Buddhism” in Singapore.

This article attempts to illuminate the rise of Reformist Buddhism in Singapore, and its quest to rebrand the faith in the island-state through advocating Buddhist ideology as the key emphasis by its practitioners rather than ritual. It argues that Reformist Buddhists, unlike Traditional Buddhists, are concerned with the active reflexive engagement, rather than the established dramatization of piety and acquiescence to the elemental tenets of the religion is institutionalized. The goal for supporters of Reformist Buddhism therefore is material practicality instead of ritualistic enchantment of the religion. Instances of these pronouncements of practicality are evident in their rational valuation of scriptural tenets, which answer contemporary needs,

and the pre-occupation with principally serving worldly needs by promoting interactions among members and providing care and assistance to the less fortunate, for reasons which will be explained below. A study of the increasing influence of Reformist Buddhism illustrates the complex intra-faith relationships amongst the Buddhists in Singapore, and suggests how this brand of “New Buddhism” can potentially polarize the practice of Buddhism in the country.

This study has three sections. First, it presents a concise historical background of Buddhism in Singapore and the transition towards Reformist Buddhism over the recent decades to provide the background for this study. Next, based on Kuah Khun Eng’s seminal study on Reformist Buddhism in Singapore, we critically examine the concept of Reformist Buddhism in Singapore and highlight some of its characteristics pertaining to religious piety. Finally, this article presents and discusses the findings collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with 50 lay Buddhists in Singapore.

## Background: From “Traditional” to “Reformist” Buddhism in Singapore

After the British established Singapore as a trading port in 1819, multitudes of migrants from China flooded the island in search of business and employment opportunities, bringing their religious beliefs and practices along with them. Most of these early migrants adopted and practiced Chinese syncretic religions consisting of Buddhist, Confucianist and Taoist elements (*Sanjiao Heyi* 三教合一) (Shi 1997: 30-56; Ong 2005: 31-33). These influences can all be seen in temples where they worshipped the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, Confucius, and the various Taoist deities (Ong 2005: 31-32). Examples of such temples include the Thian Hock Keng 天福宫, Hong San See 凤山寺, and Wak Hai Cheng Temple 粤海清庙.

Due to the growth of the Chinese population in Singapore, the migrant community in Singapore needed Chinese monks to cater to their spiritual needs. Ong points out that the earliest record of the presence of a Buddhist monk from China in Singapore was found on an 1836 wooden tablet in Hang Sun Teng 恒山亭, a Chinese temple constructed in 1828 (2005: 35). These monks were mainly concerned with chanting and per-

forming rituals (*jingchan fashi* 经忏法事) such as funeral rites, and were not active in propagating the Dharma.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, several prominent Buddhist monks from China, such as Venerable Hui Quan 会泉 and Venerable Tai Xu 太虚, came to Singapore while on pilgrimages to India, or at the request of the Chinese community who invited some of the eminent monks to Singapore to deliver Dharma talks, and even requested them to remain and become abbots or spiritual advisors of the local temples (Ong 2005: 36).

To meet the needs of the growing number of Buddhists in Singapore, monasteries were established as places of worship and residences for the migrant monks. With the support of the local Chinese community, Lianshan Shuanglin Monastery 莲山双林寺, the earliest Chinese Buddhist monastery in Singapore, was constructed in 1898. Kong Meng San Phor Khar See 光明山普觉寺, the largest monastery in Singapore, was founded by Venerable Zhuandao 转道 in 1920 (Shi 1997: 150-153). The Chinese Buddhist Association (*Zhonghua Fo jiao Hui* 中华佛教会) was started in 1927 with the encouragement and support of Venerable Tai Xu. The association became the first Buddhist association in Singapore that provided education and social services to the lay Buddhist community. It thus laid the “foundation for the emergence of associational Buddhism” (Chia 2006: 36).

## “Traditional Buddhism”

Vivienne Wee, in her 1976 study, points out that despite about 50 percent of the Singaporean population declare themselves as “Buddhists” and use a single religious label, they “do not in fact share a unitary religion” (1997: 130). She suggests that “‘Buddhist’ systems as practiced in Singapore must therefore be considered in the larger context of Chinese religious behavior” (Wee 1997: 131). For this reason, a significant number of Singaporean “Buddhists” believe that the word “Buddhism” actually refers to the Chinese syncretic religions mentioned above (1997: 131). Therefore, it was not surprising that these “Buddhists” engaged in “non-Buddhist” practices such as burning of joss-papers, drawing divine lots, fortune telling, and

spirit mediumship. To some of these “Buddhists,” “Buddhist” belief simply means:

*As long as I do good deeds and do not harm others, the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and gods will protect my family and me. When I need any help, I will just go to them and they will help me by answering my prayers (Chia 2007b).*

In Singapore, “Traditional Buddhism” as a religious phenomenon, however, cannot simply be essentialized and regarded as a syncretic Chinese religion. Rather, Wee (1997: 132) maintains that “Singapore ‘Buddhism’ can only be understood in a dialectic framework: it is on the one hand ‘Buddhism’ as Canonical Buddhism and on the other hand ‘Buddhism’ as Chinese Religion.” From as early as the Chinese migration to Singapore in the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century, up to Wee’s research published in the mid-1970s, “Traditional Buddhism” in Singapore had very much been an all-inclusive religion, embracing both Canonical Buddhist teachings and Chinese syncretic religious practices. It is therefore a very problematic term as it can mean different things to different people. But typically, a “Traditional Buddhist,” as we have defined, has some or all of the following features: worships any deities or saints be it from Buddhism, Confucianism, or Taoism; does not take refuge in the Triple Gems; receives very little or no education on the correct understanding of Canonical Buddhist teachings; and takes part in “non-Buddhistic” practices.

In Traditional Buddhism, it is the ritual that takes the center stage in the religious beliefs and practices; in Reformist Buddhism, it is the “Buddhist ideology” that is the key emphasis of the Reformist Buddhists. Therefore, Reformist Buddhism adopts “various scriptural tenets from the different Buddhist traditions to answer contemporary need” (Kuah 2003: 217). The primary focus of Reformist Buddhism is not on the “attainment of enlightenment,” but rather more concerned with “this-worldly needs,” and argues that “near salvation can be attained in this world and in one’s lifetime.” For this reason, Reformist Buddhism regards the various spiritual and socio-welfare activities as a path to achieve “this-worldly salvation.” Hence, it is a “scriptural religion as well as a social religion, and provides time and space for members to interact in a religiously and socially intimate way” (Kuah 2003: 217).

## Towards a Reformist Buddhism

In recent years, a changing socio-political and socio-economic environment in Singapore has forced Buddhism to change and cater to the modern needs of the believers, the society, and the state. Kuah Khun Eng, in her Ph.D. dissertation entitled “Protestant Buddhism in Singapore: Religious Modernization from a Longer Perspective” (1988) first applied the concept of “Reformist Buddhism” to the study of Buddhism in the Singapore context. Her dissertation was later published as a book entitled *State, Society and Religious Engineering: Towards a Reformist Buddhism in Singapore* (2003). Kuah ) examines the “the process of ‘Buddhisation’ of Chinese religious syncretism and a movement towards Reformist Buddhism within the Chinese community where 65% of the Buddhists now regard themselves as Reformist Buddhists” (2003: 1). She contends that “the agents responsible for transforming the religious landscape of the Singapore Chinese include the Singapore state, the Buddhist Sangha and the Reformist Buddhist within the community” (Kuah 2003: 1). While each group modernizes Buddhism according to its own agenda, they have all worked towards a common goal of promoting Reformist Buddhism as a modern religion in Singapore (Kuah 2003: 217).

Kuah (2003) points out that the activities of the Reformist Buddhists can be categorized into the religious and the main secular spheres. Within the religious domain, there are six main types of activities, namely: “propagating Buddhist scriptural knowledge to the public, encouraging general participation, nurturing a group of committed Reformist Buddhists, performing missionary work and engaging in subtle proselytization, putting faith into real life practice and action, and legitimizing Vesak Day as a public holiday” (Kuah 2003: 233). Within the secular domain, “Reformist Buddhists support numerous socio-cultural and welfare activities” (Kuah 2003: 233). This includes direct involvement in secular charity and welfare work, and providing manpower for the various social welfare organizations.

## Methodology

While a more in-depth contemplation of the key fundamentals of Reformist Buddhism may be useful in illustrating the “reformation” of Buddhist piety in Sin-

gapore, the mere ideological and conceptual examination of its significance would not be sufficient to showcase the contemporary realities of the management of Buddhist piety amongst believers in the island-state. It is therefore crucial to uncover the potential impact of the influence of Reformist Buddhism on the practice of Buddhism through the accounts of the lay Buddhists themselves. The understanding gained from the intellectual discussion with these believers would offer an opportunity to also determine how the intra-faith relationships amongst Buddhists have evolved and been potentially transformed. With the above set of goals in mind, qualitative research is chosen to fulfill the objectives of this research.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifty lay Buddhists in Singapore with the intent to uncover the principles and practices of Reformist Buddhism and the general opinions of these believers in contemporary Singapore. Our initial informants were known contacts while subsequent informants were solicited through snowball sampling from the referrals of these initial contacts. Attempts were also made to ensure that there is a relatively equal distribution in the ages of our core respondents with 40% of the informants (n=20) being teenagers and young adults (ages 15-30), 36% (n=18) being working adults and middle aged respondents (ages 31-54) and 24% (n=12) of the informants being older adults (ages 55 and above). An equal number of male and female informants were solicited from each age group for the in-depth interviews. Twenty-two (44%) of the informants identify themselves as Traditional Buddhists and have overtly expressed the desire to envision their brand of Buddhism according to traditional tenets of the faith such as a fervent belief in the importance of “karma,” regular involvement in Buddhist rituals, and active demonstration of “ritualistic piety.” Sixteen (32%) of the respondents have identified themselves as Reformist Buddhists and have mentioned that “this-worldly” religious achievements such as promoting spiritual interactions among members and providing social assistance to the less fortunate, practical uses of the religion and constant reflection of the viability of the religion in addressing contemporary material needs are a key focus in their practice. Finally, twelve (24%) of the informants have overtly expressed that they are “neutral” Buddhists with no preference for either “brands” of Buddhism and have revealed that they are willing to accept certain

fundamentals from each form of Buddhism.

## Principles and Practices of Reformist Buddhism

The Reformist Buddhists regard religious activities, such as going to the temples and associations to attend Dharma talks and carry out social welfare activities, more important than merely chanting the Buddhist scriptures. The notion of piety for these Reformist Buddhists is thus reflected and deliberated through interactive engagement with spiritual leaders in these institutions rather than through the independent recitation of the written coverage of religious devotion and piousness articulated mostly through Buddhist texts and literature. There is a desire for most of the Reformist Buddhists to both attain confirmation on a particular principle of the Buddhist scripture with fellow discussants in these religious organizations or to reflect on the plausibility of the continuous adherence to a particular principle in the contemporary world. The contemplation of piety for the Reformist Buddhists is thus achieved through both the direct interchange of the significance of each religious principle with other believers and the contemporary update of the religious tenets:

*I go to my Buddhist organization every Sunday for our weekly Sunday class. My Dharma friends and I often seek to debate on issues pertaining to our faith and understand how other believers adhere to the religious code. By being aware of how other believers interpret and follow each religious principle, it is helpful for us be aware of how the religion is practiced. Therefore, we discuss about it in an organized setting. It is way better than merely reading the texts and scriptures and envisioning that the practice and interpretation of each tenet is still unchanged from what is written (Weiwen, Reformist Buddhist).*

The main preoccupation for Reformist Buddhists is for the religion to take on a more pro-active role in the face of social changes. This form of activism is often described as “Buddhism for the younger generation” and is viewed as a relatively contemporary practice promoted by informants predominantly in the 15-30 age category. They have argued that in order to understand the intricate teachings of their religion, they have to be more pro-active in carrying out concrete practical

actions to essentially practice what they preach, and also to attend religious activities and events other than what has been traditionally prescribed in the religious calendar. The principles of Reformist Buddhism are revealed by this informant:

*I think the main thing is to constantly carry out activities to showcase that you have carried out things that you believed and have internalized in the Buddhist scriptures. While some of the Traditional Buddhists just read the importance of central tenets such as metta (loving-kindness) and being compassion, they do not regularly participate in activities like we do such as organizing recycling outings and visiting old folks' homes (Jian Ming, Reformist Buddhist).*

The majority of those who have identified themselves as Traditional Buddhists have opined that they do engage in activities to “activate” and “perform” what is introduced as the central principles in the Buddhist scriptures. On one hand, they have voluntarily conducted classes to present the fundamentals of the religion to welfare centers and participated in activities such as the “Vegetarian-awareness” programs to highlight their Buddhist’s beliefs. On the other hand, they have admitted that their actions and activities are less-coordinated and organized compared to the Reformist Buddhists. Many Traditional Buddhists have also espoused that there is a potential for Reformist Buddhists to alter the practice of Buddhism in Singapore from an essentially independent and private practice to one which is mostly co-coordinated and managed with constant interactions with other pro-active believers. This is illustrated through the account of this informant:

*While most of the Traditionalists engaged in religious activities and exercises which are non-routine and on an ad-hoc basis, the Reformist Buddhists are more organized in that they are constantly managing and initiating activities on a more regularized basis. This may influence the rest of the Buddhists in being more active in negotiating with their counterparts to partake in these religious activities (Jialing, Traditional Buddhist).*

Another form of departure in the principles and practices of Reformist Buddhists from Traditional Buddhists is in the conception of elemental Buddhist’s morality and ethics such as the precept of non-killing. The Traditional and ‘neutral’ Buddhists have mostly interpreted this precept as prohibiting the killing of

living forms, such as animals and humans, and have deemed the Reformists’ adherence as overly dramatic and even an over-interpretation of the fundamental religious teachings and principles. The Reformist Buddhists, on the other hand, have seemingly taken a step further in their adoption of this precept as they apply this tenet to food consumption and advocate a strict vegetarian diet. According to one informant:

*Unlike Traditional Buddhists who are only vegetarians on the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month, we do not think that such practice is based on a correct understanding of the Buddha-dharma. Instead, all Buddhists should try to become vegetarians, if possible, in order to discourage and prevent the killing of animals (Liven, Reformist Buddhist).*

Reformist Buddhists work towards removing misconceptions of the religion largely by clearing up the public’s confusion with it as an associated form of Taoism and by dispelling myths of it being linked to enchanted and non-rational practices as depicted by the mass media. The Reformist Buddhist informants have articulated that they have often looked through newspapers reports and online articles and forums on their religion. They have either been active in correcting any perceived mistakes on online forums, and by reinstating their forms of piety in meetings with religious leaders of other faiths in the event that their objectives have been mismanaged:

*We are very aware and conscious of how our religion has been misrepresented in the media, such as inaccuracies in the depiction of our religion when dramas are depicting Buddhists using animal offerings in certain religious events (thus associating us with Taoists) and certain newspapers and online forums showing that bogus monks have been actively seeking donations in the public. We will actively request the producers of the TV shows or the website manager to review their content accordingly (Jimmy, Reformist Buddhist).*

Reformist Buddhists have been increasingly pro-active in promoting their religion by working with Buddhist organizations in Singapore and abroad, and have also been facilitating activities with the Singapore Buddhist Federation. Many of these informants, who have identified themselves as Reformist Buddhists, have also opined that they have been involved in the activities of associated international Buddhist organizations such as the Buddha’s Light International Asso-

ciation 国际佛光会, Dharma Drum Mountain 法鼓山 and Tzu Chi Foundation 佛教慈济慈善事业基金会 in Singapore. The Tzu Chi Foundation, for instance, has been viewed as a rising star by these informants for advancing the awareness and consciousness of the Buddhist faiths to Singaporeans through its participation in popular locally organized events such as the annual World Book Fair, by providing social welfare and medical services, and through the creation of a Jing Si Book and Café, which besides offering books and drinks, aims to provide its guest with “some quiet, meditative moments in the midst of a bustling city such as Singapore” (Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation [Singapore Branch] 2007).

More importantly, certain Reformist Buddhists have also explicated their dissatisfaction with the lack of good publicity by Traditional Buddhists. They are also unhappy coming second to other faiths, in particular the Christian faith, in recruiting new members and believers:

*The main quest for us Reformist Buddhists is to generate greater awareness of our religion by participating in charity events broadcasted in the media and introducing more engaging and fun activities to attract the younger generation of potential believers. It always seems like there is nothing being done as of now to transform Buddhism from its old-fashioned and traditional tag-on as compared to other faiths such as Christianity where its believers are given rock concerts and pop stars like Sun Ho to enjoy (Jamie, Reformist Buddhist).*

Buddhist music and songs are no longer confined to the traditional Buddhist chanting, or the hitting of the gongs and wooden fish. Just recently, Venerable Sik Kwang Sheng, the abbot of the Kong Meng San Phor Khar See Monastery, launched a Buddhist album entitled “Buddha Smiles” and even held a concert to celebrate the Vesak Day (KMSPKS, 2007). An increasing number of Buddhist organizations, such as the Panna Youth Centre 正信佛教青年会, have started to adopt Buddhist praise and worship services. Buddhist worship songs such as “Buddhist Doxology” and “Homage to Buddha,” written by Wayfarer, a well-known Malaysian Buddhist band, are sung during their worship session (See Appendix for the song lyrics).

## Opinions on Reformist Buddhism

The primary concerns of the informants who identify themselves as Reformist Buddhist are not only on the attainment of enlightenment, but also place an emphasis on worldly needs. Buddhist activism for societal welfare could be cultivated through the debates and communication of elemental Buddhist values, formatted for the needs of contemporary society. Most Reformist Buddhists have pointed out that the socio-cultural and welfare aspects of society must be emphasized in addition to being conscious of the basic spiritual principles of their religious doctrines:

*Most of the Traditional Buddhists are concerned with the philosophical and spiritual elements of Buddhism, such as which elements are regarded as auspicious, which signs are regarded as good or favorable, and which religious rituals are suitable for which occasions. All these are fine but instead of being so spiritually occupied, they also need to reflect on using the religion to debate and contemplate on contemporary issues such as achieving social welfare and justice (Queenie, Reformist Buddhist).*

While the Reformist Buddhists hope that this new theme of looking outward to contemporary issues may help rebrand the religion from its existing conception and misconception by the general public, the Traditional Buddhists have admitted to having some reservations with the preoccupation of these activities and regard them as an attempt to secularize the religion while forgoing more time attuning oneself with the central fundamentals of piety and religious principles. In fact, many of them neither appear supportive nor have very positive opinions on the Reformist Buddhists. They even question the Reformist Buddhists’ pro-active stance in presenting the religion as a more interesting and exciting religion which may potentially lead to certain elements of the religion being overshadowed or neglected in the quest for rebranding:

*I think making the religion more attractive is good but I’m worry that it would lead to a form of secularizing now common among the Christian churches in Singapore. It may appear that the task is to attract attention instead of devoting more time to the private study of the religion (James, Traditional Buddhist).*

*I do not even know what these young people are up to. On one hand, they seem very devout Buddhists wanting to contribute to the religion. On the other*

*hand, it seems that they want to change and reform everything. If they think they are so good, then let them go ahead. (Weian, Traditional Buddhist)*

*I think there is little need to strive for more activities and large-scale participation with other religious organizations in such a dramatic manner. The main focus is still on the quest for the individual self to attain enlightenment and achieve good karma (Weijia, a 'neutral' Buddhist).*

The principles and practices espoused by the Reformist Buddhists need to be examined in light of the reactions from the other Buddhists in Singapore. Traditional, and even neutral Buddhists, have rejected this pro-active and practical stance in favor of a return to the more traditional principles of Buddhism. This is especially the case of Buddhism's primary focus of cultivating oneself through religious precepts.

In addition, there are negative reactions towards the Reformist Buddhism's rejection of monkhood as being the sole fundamental path to salvation, adding instead an emphasis on spiritual and socio-welfare activities to attain this-worldly salvation. Certain Traditional Buddhists have indicated that they are very apprehensive towards the Reformist's non-exclusive labeling of the time-honored and sacred practice of monkhood as a quintessential element of personal salvation and a fundamental sign of religious piety:

*I think the majority of us are still relatively traditional in the sense that we still perceive going through the sacred rites of monkhood and participating in the teachings of the monastery and its accompanying rituals as the definitive form of piety. I wonder why the Reformists Buddhists are not so firm in claiming these sacred acts as the ultimate form of religious devotion (Jialing, Traditional Buddhist).*

The lack of encouragement to practice monkhood rites and the incessant pronouncements by Reformist Buddhism to care for the less-privileged individuals in society has also been deemed as an affront to Traditional Buddhists in Singapore as many have hinted at the Traditional Buddhists' detachment or hitherto lack of concern with contemporary problems. The manner in which the Reformist Buddhists have attempted to de-mark themselves as a pro-active group tasked to help the needy has also been evaluated by Traditional and 'neutral' Buddhists as a sign of the Reformists' construction of a distinct line of delineation from the

other Buddhists in contemporary Singapore:

*It seems that by tagging themselves as Reformist Buddhists, they can in a sense demark themselves as very active believers who are presumably more influential and more attuned with the times and the practical concerns of the people as compared to other less reformatory Buddhists (Michelle, Traditional Buddhist).*

## Conclusion

This article seeks to examine the rise of Reformist Buddhism in contemporary Singapore and its quest to rebrand the faith through the advocacy of Buddhist ideology as the key emphasis by its practitioners. It uncovers the principles and practices of Reformist Buddhism and the general opinions on these believers in Singapore. Reformist Buddhists are primarily concerned with the active reflexive engagement of how the hitherto established display of piety and acquiescence to the elemental tenets of the religion is institutionalized. They have rather different views and perspectives from the Traditional Buddhists. Hence, the Buddhists in Singapore are certainly not a monolithic group. By examining the complexities surrounding the rise of Reformist Buddhism and the issues concerning the renegotiation of piety in the Buddhist faith, it surfaces the complex intra-faith relationships amongst the Buddhists in Singapore.

## Appendix

### Buddhist Doxology

*P. Carus*

Bright shineth the sun in his splendor by day,  
And bright the moon radiance by night;  
Bright shineth the hero in battle array,  
And the sage in his thought shineth bright.  
But by day and by night none so glorious and bright  
As Lord Buddha, the Source of all Spiritual Light;  
But by day and by night none so glorious and bright  
As Lord Buddha, the Source of all Spiritual Light.

Source: Wee n.d.: 2

### Homage to Buddha

*Victor Wee*

Far over the distant lands,  
We our voices raise,  
To our gentle Teacher,  
Hymns of joy and praise.

Let Thy holy abode,  
Now with joy resounds,  
Glory to Gotama,  
Who Nibbana found.

Chorus:  
Each child shall offer,  
Heart devotions true,  
Promising forever,  
Righteous deeds to do.

Here before His images,  
Blossoms rare we place,  
Emblems true of beauty,  
Purity and grace.

Source: Wee n.d.: 15

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# To Be or Not to Be an Artist:

## Rethinking the Social Complexities of Thai Mural Painting

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### Introduction

Before I embarked on my fieldwork in Thailand in 2006, I considered all Thai mural painters to be artists. They paint commissioned work on temple walls therefore it seemed logical to call them artists. However during my first visit to national artist Ajarn Chalermchai Kositpipat's temple-in-the-making at Wat Rong Khun in Chiang Rai, I confronted the reality that not everyone contributing to the temple's artistic endeavors are considered "artists."<sup>1</sup> My interest in mural depictions transformed into a desire to understand the social complexities between the central Thai artists and northern Thai folk artists working behind the scenes at Wat Rong Khun. I discovered that in Thai mural painting it is not so much the stories and the morals painted that are important to the local audiences, but who paints the murals. The man behind the brush embodies the soul (*chi*) of the painting, and canvasses a template narrating the way people imagine their local histories.<sup>2</sup> In northern Thailand a northern Thai folk artist (*sa-la*) may not possess the skills of the central Thai craftsman (*chang kian*) or the formal fine arts training of an artist (*sin*), but he paints from his soul to preserve his understanding of regional Buddhist mural painting. The *chang kian* and the *sa-la* represent two different groups of craftsmen and folk artists in Thailand. To call

a *sa-la* a *chang kian* ignores their efforts to stand out as regional folk artists and generalizes their work as a part of central Thailand's visual discourse.

In central Thailand, there is commonly only one artist (*sin*) creating the mural while several craftsmen (*chang kian*) work behind the scenes. The artist creates the scenes and works closely with the temple patrons, while the craftsmen creatively fill in the details of the murals. In northern Thailand, a local folk artist (*sa-la*) performs the role of both artist and craftsman. Despite his efforts, the Fine Arts Department in Bangkok never considers the *sa-la*'s work as art and he is seldom recognized as a regional specialist. The following essay seeks to better understand the art of mural



Figure 1: National artist (*sin*) Chalermchai Kositpipat (second from right) entertains fans of his artwork at his temple Wat Rong Khun in Chiang Rai.



**Figure 2:**  
Craftsman  
(*chang kian*)  
Sook paints  
the Defeat of  
Mara scene  
in the ordi-  
nation hall  
of Wat Rong  
Khun.

painting in Thailand by exploring the lives of the painters and the social complexities they encounter as artists in Thailand today. On my first day of fieldwork at Chalermchai's temple outside of Chiang Rai in 2006, we enthusiastically toured the complex. As we entered the ordination hall I met the men behind the murals. Sook, a muralist from Kanchanaburi in western central Thailand, considers himself a *chang kian*. Daily, Sook executes the murals Chalermchai designs, as a craftsman – not an artist. As we exited the ordination hall, in between his multiple mobile phone conversations, interruptions on his walkie-talkie and fans queued to sign his printed artwork, Chalermchai introduced me to a third group of craftsmen called *sa-la*, which means craftsman in Kham Mueang, the language of the Thai Yuan people in Lanna, northern Thailand.<sup>3</sup> These craftsmen differ from Sook and Chalermchai because they are local folk artists from northern Thailand and share a common Lanna culture, in contrast to Chalermchai and Sook who are from central Thailand. Chalermchai explained the details of the creative processes behind his work to

me as we staggered through the crowds at the temple he calls “Heaven on Earth (*suwan bon din*)” and I realized that to study contemporary mural painting in Thailand I need to first understand the men behind the brush.

The word Sook uses to address Chalermchai – *sin*, short for *silpa*, is a contemporary word in the Thai vocabulary. The conceptual origins of the word began in 1932 when King Vajiravudh commissioned an Italian sculptor by the name of Corrado Feroci to create a series of patriotic public sculptures to represent the rise of the modern nation-state in Bangkok. By the 1930s and 1940s Feroci's commissions shifted from the court to early-Italian fascist art constructed by Phibun's dictatorship (Poshyananda 1992: 52). During this period Feroci introduced not only a new style of politicized art to Thailand, but also the concept of artist as a civil servant (*chang kian*). It was not long before Feroci “fell in love” with Thailand and decided to make the newly established Fine Arts Department in Bangkok (FADB) his home, changing his name to Silpa Bhirasri (Philips 1992: 6). Contemporary Thai art became synonymous with his name Silpa (pronounced in Thai, *sin-lipa*), or *sin* for short. Henceforth the distinction between those

who created art as a *sin* and those who created crafts as *chang kian* was more clearly defined, constructing a new category in Thai social hierarchies.

In contrast, the title *sa-la*, craftsman, embodies a long history of artistic exchange between the Lanna Kingdom in northern Thailand and Burma. The origin of the term *sa-la* stems from the Burmese dialect word *saya*, or

teacher.<sup>4</sup> In Kham Mueang the term was first used over 200 years ago when Burmese merchants began to trade their goods in the northern regions of what is today contemporary Thailand. The word *sa-la* is one example of many culturally loaded words in Thai society ex-



**Figure 3:** Local northern Thai craftsmen (*sa-la*) work behind the scenes at Wat Rong Khun for artist Chalermchai Kositpipat.

Table 1: Definitions of Artist, Folk Artist, and Lanna Artisan in Thailand

<i>silpa</i> (pronounced sin) Artist	<i>chang kian</i> Central Thai craftsman	<i>sa-la</i> Northern Thai folk artist
A formally trained professional artist usually from the Fine Arts Department at Silpakorn University in Bangkok or another foreign (commonly western) University. This word originates from the Thai nickname for the artist Feroci, Ajarn Sin. The sin is considered a creative innovator in regard to his style and art product.	A craftsman of any origin in Thailand who creates traditional art products to sell at the market for a living. Does not have to be formally trained, but usually refers to a person who has attended a technical school for art. The <i>chang kian</i> 's product reflects education and creativity, but derives from traditional styles and medias.	Specifically a northern Thai folk artist of Lanna origin, originating from the Burmese dialect word, <i>saya</i> or teacher. Similar to a <i>chang kian</i> , the <i>sa-la</i> produces folk art for profit, but his market is the local Lanna community rather than tourists at the market. The primary concern of the <i>sa-la</i> is maintaining his unique Lanna Thai identity, specific to the northern regions of Thailand.

pressing a deviation from the national (i.e. central Thai) discursive framework. To begin, *sa-la* represents a specific group of folk artists from a specific place in Thailand. The only people who identify with this word are Lanna people speaking Kham Mueang. In the standard Thai language (central Thai), which is the predominant dialect in Thailand, *sa-la* is an unknown word. Although it is only one word, this title represents social divisions between those who use it in their everyday discourse and the *sin* and *chang kian* who are unaware of the word in central Thailand. *Sa-la* is therefore, associated with a marginal group of folk artists in northern Thailand who are not defined by the FADB in central Thailand.

A *sa-la* and a *chang kian* share similar careers as mural painters in Thailand. However the more time I spent with *chang kian* and *sa-la* it became clear that the *sa-la* understand their job as mural painters to be unique to northern Thailand. This experience led me to retrace my steps in Bangkok and Chiang Mai and to rethink the social complexities of the men behind the murals. I began in Bangkok to learn the stories of Tong and Yoi, who they are and how they differ from the *sa-la* in northern Thailand.

## The Men Behind a Bangkok Mural: Tong and Yoi

For over sixteen years, Tong and Yoi have painted the walls of the ordination hall at Wat Tridosadepvoravihara (Wat Tri) in the Banglamphu neighborhood of Bangkok. From Monday through Friday, Tong and his colleagues paint national artist Chakraphan

Posayakrit's murals: not only as an act of merit (*tham bun*) and to preserve history, but as a commissioned job as *chang kian*. For Tong, the definition of mural painting is not purely didactic, as Wray (1972: 16) suggests or religious as Boisselier (1976) claims. Instead, for the muralists Tong and Yoi, it is a way of life influenced by the world outside the walls of the ordination hall and articulated on the canvassed walls within. As Cate notes, during the past century "agencies of modernity," such as the development and growth of the Thai government's Fine Arts Department, the Por-chang School of Fine Arts and Silpakorn University, shaped the tradition of Thai mural painting and confined it to the discipline of art history (2003: 7). The study of Thai mural painting in the twentieth century defined Thai mural paintings as "Thai art", and thus became part of the national discourse on contemporary Thai identity (Cate 2003). However, Thai mural painting should be understood from alternative perspectives in addition to the traditional art history understanding



Figure 4: Tong paints on national artist Chakraphan Posayakrit's murals at Wat Tridosadepvoravihara in Banglamphu, Bangkok.

Figure 5: The Enlightenment scene located behind the main Buddha image and outlined with Swarovski crystals in Wat Tri, Bangkok.



of pictures painted on walls. Specifically, the study of Thai mural paintings should consider actors, such as Tong and Yoi and their patron national artist Chakraphan Posayakrit. As Cate states, “the significance of their places and practices of mural painting – including relationships between temple abbot, painter, the patron; modes of training; and artists’ intentions – cannot be separated from the diverse public discourses that shape and interpret those practices” (2003: 7).

In contemporary Thailand, education divides those who become *sin* and those who remain *chang kian* in a mural painter’s life. Tong and Yoi formally studied Thai mural painting at Porchang Academy in Bangkok, but not at the Fine Arts Department of Silpakorn University like Chakraphan and Chalermchai. The Porchang Academy prepares students to work as *chang kian* while students attending the Fine Arts Department at Silpakorn University have the opportunity to

become a teacher (*ajarn*).

As Tong filled in the details of the scenes showing his friends being chased up a coconut tree by a barking dog, he explained to me that many things in life shape a mural. For example, Thai puppetry (*Hun Lakorn Lek*) influences his perspective depicting movement; the news on the radio he listens to while painting impacts the actions of the people at the border of the mural (*ruub kaak*); the personality of his colleagues determines the faces he paints on their personal characters hidden in the scenes of the mural; and the requests of his supervisor Ajarn Chakraphan, the mural creator, instructs the visual layout of the murals. Inspiration for the details Tong and Yoi paint comes from all walks of life in Thailand: performance arts and music, mass media, temple tourism and personal relationships all contribute to his execution of a mural painting.

Yoi signaled me over to the table where he was having coffee inside the ordination hall (*bot*). He proceeded to unroll the blueprints to the unfinished murals. With his hand holding down one corner of the blue-print, a coffee mug on the adjacent corner and my hand on the other, he explained his and Tong’s task in mural painting versus Ajarn Chakraphan’s. Like Sook at Wat Rong Khun in Chiang Rai, Tong and Yoi are the master artist’s assistants: they paint the plans created by well-known commissioned artists.

Historically, mural painters were usually monks studying in the temple where they resided, although some traveled long distances to paint temples in other regions. For example, the monk who painted the ordination hall at Wat Choltarasinghe in Narathiwat was from Songkhla. The ordination hall is painted in the southern-style at Wat Choltarasinghe, but the murals at the temple where the monk resided are painted in the Bangkok-style. Today the tradition has changed, and commissioned artists hire assistants to paint their murals. Who pays for the murals and the amount paid varies per temple. In northern Thailand, I was told that a single panel of a mural begins at 18,000 Thai Baht, and the artist’s pay may start at as little as 9,000 Thai Baht (250 USD) per mural section.

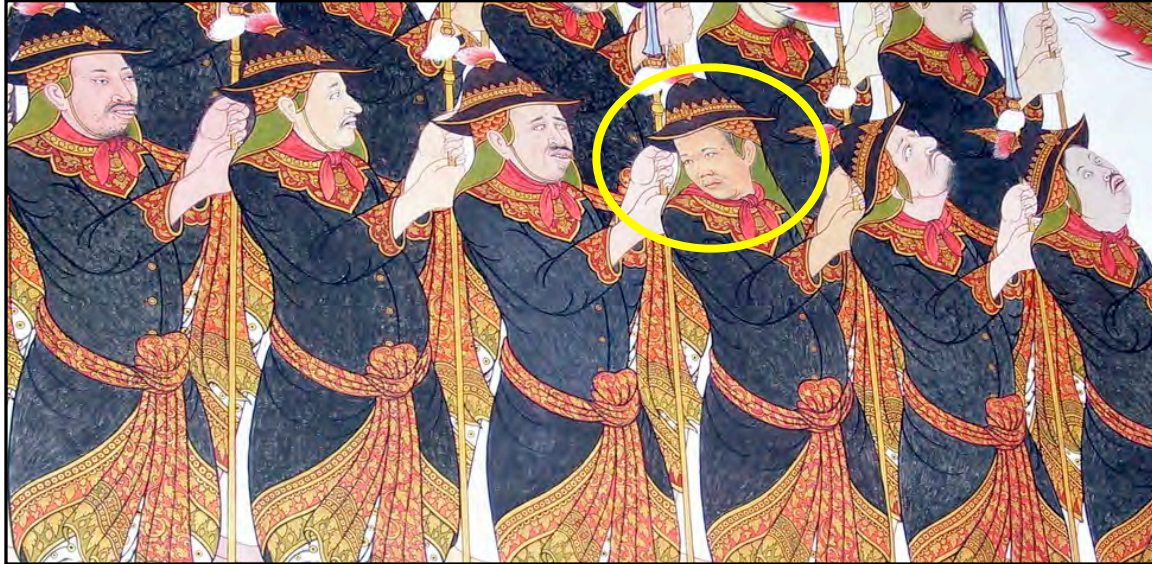


Figure 6:  
Mural detail: Yoi  
paints himself into the  
murals at  
Wat Tri

Tong, Yoi and Sook complete the paintings drafted by the master artists and give their personal touch by filling in the details along the borders of the murals. Tong emphasized Ajarn Chakraphan's authorship of the murals, a similar experience during my conversations with Sook in Chiang Rai. However the details and creativity tucked into the corners of the murals were uniquely his, and he did not hesitate to show them off. Also like Sook, Tong and Yoi described themselves as *chang kian* and Ajarn Chakraphan as *sin*. Ajarn Chakraphan and Ajarn Chalermchai will be known for the murals once they are finished, not Tong, Yoi or Sook.

Just as the stories jumped from scene to scene, so did our conversation. I asked them where I should begin reading the murals on the wall and Yoi commented that temple mural paintings are not required to follow a format or include specific stories. Today, these decisions are left up to the temple's abbot and the head mural painter. Contradicting introductory books on Thai mural painting (Matics 1992; Wray 1972), Yoi and Tong explained that if the wall ends before they finish the *Wetsandon Chadok* then so be it, it will remain an incomplete version of the story.

In between the hellish world of earthly desires and *nibbana* I sat on the floor and observed the social atmosphere. Each Wednesday at Wat Tri, a local *Lakorn Lek* puppet group rehearses for their upcoming performance. A Bangkok policeman, still in uniform, guided the puppeteers in unison as the music played softly in the background. To my right, Tong perched on the scaffolding and painted scenes for the next mu-

ral. To my left, Tong's colleague Yoi read the newspaper while listening to the radio. The national anthem blared through the speakers and although no one stopped to notice, it was already six o'clock.

### Northern Thai muralist: Lang Nan

Until I left Tong and Yoi at Wat Tri in Bangkok, I did not completely understand the social divisions between the murals they painted and the murals of local northern mural painters. At this point, I understood all mural painting to be art because the FADB defined Ajarn Chalermchai's murals as such. My understanding was also shaped by the literature concerning Thai mural painting, which excludes folk art as a discipline of mural painting. When I left Wat Tri to study with local mural painters in Chiang Mai, it quickly became clear that there is a social division between the fine art I experienced at Wat Tri and Wat Rong Khun and the mural painting I would discover, painted by Lang Nan (Uncle Nan). As so truthfully explained by Chatrri

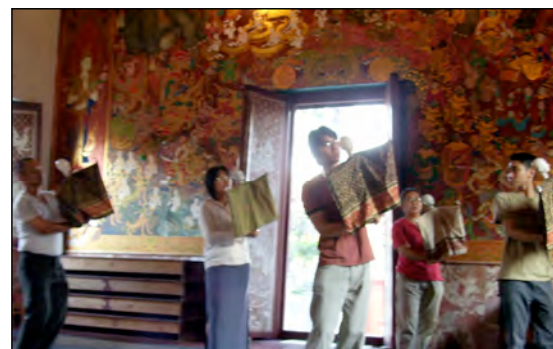


Figure 7:  
Bangkok policeman  
(far left)  
directs  
Lakorn Lek  
rehearsal  
at Wat Tri  
every  
Wednesday

Prakitnonthakarn (2006: 7), “actually, the royal arts are just one side of the coin. A thorough understanding of the Thai identity cannot ignore the other side, the folk arts and crafts that derive from the everyday life of commoners, who constitute most of the Thai population.”

Conversations with Lang Nan revealed to me what mural painting means to those outside the FADB in Bangkok. Everyday people, such as Lang Nan, began to shape my perspectives on Thai mural painting and they became the focus of my study for the remainder of my fieldwork in Thailand. Lang Nan is a folk artist, a *sa-la*. Unlike the muralists in Bangkok I worked with, Nan executes his paintings alone. Without a team of painters, Lang Nan draws his inspiration from printed art depicting the Buddha’s life to preserve Buddhist stories for the local devotees in his northern Thai community.

Lang Nan was born to a Buddhist family in the northern Thai town of Fang, over sixty years ago. He grew up studying in his neighborhood monastery as a novice and learned the art of mural painting from the senior monks during his free time. It was not long after Nan entered his teenage years that he left the monastery. As a young novice, he was caught with a photograph of a local girl, on whom he had a crush, hidden under his pillow. Nan believed this was the one place where the senior monks would not catch him, but he was wrong and soon after, he disrobed. He practiced painting his new-found love’s Indian facial features, which would much later become the defining characteristic of his mural paintings. When I met Nan in February 2007, one of the first photos he shared with me was the black and white picture of him and his late wife as a young couple. He asked me the rhetorical question, ‘*suay, ma?*’ (Isn’t she beautiful?). And we laughed, because there was no other answer than, ‘*suay mak mak*’ (Yes, very very beautiful). Nan pointed out her almond-shaped eyes and bright smile,

and candidly joked that she was well worth disrobing for. Nan teased, “Since the Buddha and my wife were both *khawk* (foreigners, in this case referring to Indians) I try to paint them as such.” He explained, “If the figure isn’t realistic and the gestures are not accurate, the people cannot understand the meaning behind the mural.” Nan’s murals emphasize realism for didactic purposes. If the lay onlooker cannot understand or relate to the scene in the mural painting he believes the painting quality to be substandard.

Lang Nan’s style is not that of the national artists, which Sook, Tong or Yoi paint. Instead, Lang Nan paints a style copied from Buddha postcards printed by the S. Thammapakdi & Sons Printing Company in Bangkok. These postcards traveled to northern Thailand in the early-1960s, and became the most popular style of mural painting in contemporary history. However, the FADB does not consider this style “art” because of *sa-la*’s lack of creativity when copying directly from the postcard to the temple wall. Therefore, painters such as Lang Nan are commonly excluded from studies on Thai mural painting. Since Nan’s primary concern for painting the murals is realism he is attracted to and undisturbed by painting in the uncreative Buddha postcard style.

Nan commented on the differences between his style and the style of Chalermchai at Wat Rong Khun and Chakraphan at Wat Tri in Bangkok:

*If someone wanted me to paint in that (Bangkok) style I would remind them how difficult it is for others to understand. In the story of Buddha, the*

*scenes are also not separated and it’s just confusing in the traditional styles. For example, the place of the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and death are in different locations, so it is confusing when painters paint the scenes on one wall without clear scene dividers.*

For Nan, he paints in the Buddha postcard style for didactic reasons but openly critiques its lack of aesthetic appeal. Nan commented, “When Siddhartha



Figure 8: Lang Nan finishes his mural project at Wat Sri Don Sattad in Chiang Dao (2007).

leaves his palace, the character still has on his crown. But Siddhartha wasn't Thai, he was Indian so he wasn't wearing a Thai crown and his face was Indian, not Thai." Nan argues that the *sa-la* should not reinterpret historical depictions of the Buddha or Buddhist stories from their original content for purely artistic endeavors because this may confuse the lay observer.

Nan cannot say if his mural painting style is unique to northern Thailand, but he sees his work developing over the years. The origin of his style does not seem to concern him, especially since his murals are so popular in the northern regions. During our conversation in Chiang Rai at Wat Don Satad I placed a set of the Buddha postcards on the floor of the meditation hall (*sa-la*) in front of us. Nan looked carefully at the Buddha postcards and looked up at me after several moments of silence and said, "my finished product here is about the same as this in the end, but I don't care. My work is still unique. How? I am a *chitakorn*, a *sa-la* that's how." In Thai, *chit* means heart or soul and *korn* means hand; when the two words were combined by Nan, he described the uniqueness of his work as painted from the soul. Nan's sentiment is not unique: many *sa-la* I encountered expressed a similar passion for their work.

In my experiences, Lang Nan's sentiment was also shared with the monastic community in Chiang Mai. Phra Yueng, a monk from Wat Tha Kham, and I spoke about my experiences with local mural painters such as Nan. Without mentioning my experiences with *sin* from Bangkok or local *sa-la*, Phra Yueng openly shared with me, "When we build and paint, we paint from our soul. Silpakorn University in Bangkok sends restoration artists and they have the skill to make our temples beautiful, but they have no northern soul (Phra Yueng 2007)." The 'we' Phra Yueng spoke of referred specifically to local artists, the *sa-la* painting their ordination and prayer halls in the Buddha postcard style. Phra Yueng was not aware of the social divisions between local folk artists and the *sin* from the FADB, but he had experienced many people comparing northern folk art and folklore to what he felt are the traditions of central Thailand. For Phra Yueng, the only mural painters he



Figure 9: Lang Nan's murals from Wat Sun-ton Meung Neua in the Doi Sakhet area outside Chiang Mai (Buddhist Year, 2040). Although his murals are copied from the Buddha Posters printed in Bangkok, his signature is creating Indian facial features on the characters.

appreciates in Chiang Mai are those who call themselves *sa-la*, folk artists creating with the local people in mind. The product, whether a copy from a Bangkok Buddha postcard or a classical Lanna rendition, is equal in his perspective if it is created by a *sa-la*.

I asked Nan if he considered himself an accomplished artist (*sin*). His eyes widened, and he replied "no, no, no... I am a not a *sin*, I am a *sa-la*." Until this moment, I was almost convinced by Nan's claim that he was not concerned with fine art trends and debates in Bangkok. I asked Nan, "what is a *sa-la*?" He replied, "it's Kham Mueang for folk artist, or craftsman (*chang kian*). Before this day I understood the muralist as either a craftsman (*chang kian*) or an artist (*sin*), but I had never before understood the importance and status behind the northern Kam Mueang term *sa-la*.

It often occurred during my fieldwork that local mural painters in northern Thailand understood their work as unambiguous styles distinct from the murals produced in central Thailand. Nan paints the murals with the intentions that the images preserve northern Thai Buddhism for the Lanna people, a skill a *chang kian* or even a *sin* may not possess. It is clear that the intention of a local *sa-la* represents the interests of the local people and therefore, his product was to be understood as Lanna – despite its origins and FADB interpretations. By insisting that his work is that of a *sa-la*, the local mural painters, such as Lang Nan, resist the dominant art discourses in the Thai nation state.

The images influencing the murals and the finished product of the *sa-la* may appear to be the same as *chang kian*, but since he himself is Lanna, so is his

Figure 10:  
Original S.  
Thammapadi &  
Sons Printing  
Company Buddha postcards,  
1959. *Sa-la* such  
as Nan copy the  
style and scenes  
from these post-  
cards and paint  
them on the  
temple walls.  
Nan believes  
that the clear  
division of  
scenes and the  
realistic images  
help people to  
more clearly  
understand the  
story.



work, reflecting one expression of modern northern Thai identity. “My paintings and I are what ever you (the FADB) want to call us,” Nan told me in a moment of frustration when I asked him to describe the style of his paintings. Admittedly Nan knew that his murals were not Lanna style, but, “I cannot say why” he confessed. “I know my style comes from the *farang* (foreigner), and I can see that the scenes, colors and perspective are from central Thailand. My work reflects the need of the local northern people to learn the stories of the Buddha, not to preserve an art style.” Nan believes that his lack of originality is the primary reason that he is not famous for his mural paintings like Ajarn Chalermchai. Nan does not strive to achieve originality and creativity in his work. His objective is to fulfill the expectations of the temple devotees and guide them towards a better understanding of the Buddhist stories he paints. Nan explained, “from the local’s point of view they do not know art, but they do know that they want the stories of the Buddha to be as real as they can be.”

## Conclusion

Nan represents a collective of northern Thai mural painters with something in common. They understand their northern Buddhist art culture as distinct from Tong and Yoi’s in central Thailand. *Sa-la* such as Nan perceive the purpose of their murals to be largely didactic rather than an artistic expression, dissimilar to what Sook and Chalermchai strive for in their murals at

Wat Rong Khun. The mural styles Nan paints are not unique, and he does not refute the idea that they are directly related to the S. Thammapakdi style of Buddha postcards. For the *sa-la* the artistic style should not be the concern but rather what the murals depict, and most importantly the intention of the *chitakorn* painting it.

Experiencing mural painting through the lives of mural painters drastically differs from reading their depictions in an art history text. As I discovered, the muralists’ changing moods and inspirations shape the mural’s content and meaning. A mural painting represents many contexts for each muralist and embodies their local and regional perceptions of contemporary Thai Buddhism. I learned from Sook in Chiang Rai, Tong and Yoi in Bangkok and Nan in Chiang Mai, that a mural painter’s role in Thai society contrasts from region to region, depending on his background and formal education. Previously my appreciation of the muralist limited him to his mural. However through the stories the painters shared with me, I was able to explore the multiplicity of meaning and the social production behind the muralist and his mural painting. As I found, it is not necessarily the depictions or style that we should focus on when approaching the study of mural painting, but the histories and endeavors of the men who create them that constructs its significance.

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4 Although *sa-la* has Burmese origins, I do not believe that mural painters such as Nan prefer to be associated with Burma than with central Thailand. I did not encounter any mural painters who knew the origins of this word outside of its local Lanna context.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Ajarn" is a polite title in Thai, meaning teacher and may be used in order to show respect to an elder that they have learned something from. Although Chalermchai was not my formal "Ajarn," he taught me a tremendous deal about contemporary mural painting in Thailand.

<sup>2</sup> All terms italicized and placed in parentheses are standard Thai language unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> "Lanna" refers to Lang Nan's northern Thai culture. The term originated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Lanna Kingdom, and is now used to refer to the northern Thai Lanna people, their Kham Mueang dialect and their local histories.



# Positionality With a Cause

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Idham Bachtiar Setiadi is a PhD student at the National University of Singapore. He previously trained as an anthropologist at Universitas Indonesia. Currently, he conducts research in Borobudur where he focuses on the relations between the production of historical images and notions of time (idham.setiadi@nus.edu.sg).

## Editor's Note:

This article commemorates Professor Syed Hussein Alatas (1928–2007). Dr. Alatas was a former Professor in Malay Studies at the University of Singapore and a leading intellectual in Southeast Asian Studies.

Born in Bogor, Indonesia, he graduated from the University of Amsterdam and worked as a lecturer to the Department of Malay Studies at the University of Malaya. He founded the “*Gerakan*” party was also active in politics during the late 1960s and 70s. He was also the Head of the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore from 1967 to 1988 and in 1988 became the Vice Chancellor of the University of Malaya.

Among his important works is the still highly influential book titled “The Myth of the Lazy Native” published in 1977. The work is seen a major contribution that led to the development of new understandings in the construction of Malay identity and more importantly, addressed the dangers of the Eurocentric nature of the production of knowledge. His ideas provided great inspiration to many and laid the foundations for the development of post-colonial studies in Southeast Asia.

## Positionality with a Cause

During the first Southeast Asian Young Scholars Workshop at NUS, organized by Professor Ileo and Dr. Goh Beng Lan in November 2004, we had a moving experience with Professor Alatas. Sitting at one table with the giants of Southeast Asian scholarship, we discussed possibilities and directions, but also challenges and threats, in the future of knowledge production about Southeast Asian scholarship by Southeast Asians. In particular, we discussed how can one sustain this dream given limited resources, and shifting individual and institutional priorities.

Our workshop formulated the question in a different and, at least to myself and my fellow junior scholars, far more digestible way. Students and scholars I collaborated with asked: “would continuity develop if young Southeast Asian scholars became acquainted with the ideas, or rather questions, and the life-histories behind those questions of Southeast Asian pioneers of Southeast Asian studies?”

Positionality – the stance and ideology one operates within – was central to our line of inquiry, even more so when we realized that young scholars possessed such different academic backgrounds, life experiences, and approaches towards their roles as scholars in Southeast Asian societies. It seemed that generational issues such

as the cold war, decolonization, and so on, drew the pioneers of Southeast Asian studies together, while contemporary issues like direct foreign investment, Asian values, and so on drove the young scholars apart. Where was the continuity?

But then, there was Professor Alatas. He stood out first as the oldest pioneer and the only sociologist among the many historians and few anthropologists in the workshop. More importantly, he stood out because of his critique, not about governments and governance or Western academics and knowledge production, but about society.

Professor Alatas spoke about his life, his “enlightenment” and research; about his travels and experiences in the worlds of Dutch *ethnologie*, Indonesian *sosiologi*, and Malayan *politik*, and about his lifelong struggle against corruption. He provided an example of taking up a non-combative style of arguing, of pursuing the truth about an important matter that to many of his fellow countrymen and women was superfluous. In the workshop he seemed like Gandalf the Grey in the land of Hobbits – a giant, not yet white and all powerful, but witty, persuasive, path-breaking, full of courage and driven by a cause.

Many of us young scholars, to dramatize the comparison, were not really interested in studying corruption. Corruption seemed to many of us like a necessary evil: it was there before we were born, it was there when we grew up, and it was in the news too many times to believe that critical thinking about corruption would help. Too many times we heard that it was hopeless to fight corruption by studying it. Too many times we were told that political action was needed, now more than ever. So, in November 2004, we were sitting in the Faculty Lounge, waiting for Professor Alatas to either prove to us that knowledge helps to take a political stance against corrupt regimes or, even better, showing us an example of doing so. Such a presentation would have made the day in that workshop for young Southeast Asian scholars.

However, what Professor Alatas did was far from fueling our desire to fight. Rather, he explained that his passion for the study of corruption came about during the war of the 1940s. Then he realized two things: firstly, he saw that corrupt people are not always the powerful ones, and that corruption can become even worse when the powerful have gone – that corruption

is more related to the process of enacting power rather than power itself; and, secondly, that the initial information needed to understand that process was in books, stored away in the inaccessible bookshelves of Dutch officials. This revelation, however, was not really surprising – as he wrote extensively about it.

What was really unexpected was his story about his decision to take the long route, to go to the sources of the books, to study in the Netherlands, to become a scholar rather than a politician. A decision that led him to think about scholarship, about the role of scholars in society, about the political engagement of researchers, and about the effects of scholarly studies on real things in the bigger world. Here he recalled a story about a scholar who was locked away in a harem, yet her thoughts travelled far beyond the iron bars and walls of the cozy prison. Why would he position himself in such a way? Why was he seeing Southeast Asian scholars playing the subversive role of social critics?

The easy answer was of course it is better to be subversive rather than submissive. Yet, this does not fully grasp the notion Professor Alatas was making, since he linked the act of criticizing society with the style of arguing in a non-combative way. “What good would a blatant, straightforward critic do to change society?” he asked, and added that this should be the first question to be tackled when writing down a piece of research. How effective would be an open debate that, when boiled down to the “essence” of the exchange, only hardens the positions of the speakers rather than helping them to join forces to change society?

When I read Professor Alatas’ *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*,<sup>1</sup> published in 1977, this was not so clear. Then I had the impression that Professor Alatas was essentializing scholars as agents of change. Yet, by learning about Professor Alatas’ central questions in his career, I found a new definition of scholars as agents of change. It now seems that the key to understand *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* is the role of intellectuals in developing societies, in particular times and places: it was because of the intellectuals’ inability to generate a community in Malaysia after independence that the book was written in the first place. Professor Alatas outlined the “threats” of scholarship, which to him are: *bebalisma*, that is stupidity, indolence and stubbornness as well as backward elites, and intellectual inertia. He urged scholars in developing

societies to cope with these threats by developing a non-combative approach of critique. He said:

*It seems to me that the only way ... for the intellectuals in periods of routine life [is] to prove their own necessity by writing, publishing, lecturing, organizing small group meetings, and tackling hitherto neglected problems in a manner which is not in conflict with the specialists or the technocrats.<sup>2</sup>*

Professor Alatas' positionality was clear and the cause of taking his particular position was just. He did not need grand theories or sophisticated academic instruments to see through the events of the 1940s. What he needed the scientific method for was, in our impression of the brief encounter with this "grey giant" of Southeast Asian scholarship, to find a good way to sharpen, broaden, and convey his consciousness.

Professor Alatas had a good cause to rebel - not only against governments, academic disciplines, and schools of thought, but also, and perhaps more importantly, against society. He marched on even when corruption had become a "dated" concept, but in a non-combative way. He had a just cause. He was a scientist and an intellectual. Most importantly, he was an individual who stood out amidst the native pioneers of Southeast Asian Studies through the approach, integrity and honesty that characterized his life and his work.

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## Endnotes

1 Alatas, Syed Hussein, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*, London: Frank Cass, 1977.

2 Ibid, p. 74.



# The Capital

WRITTEN BY WANIT CHARUNGKITANAN

Translated by Noah Viernes, Jennifer Thepsenavong and Bryce Beemer

Edited and with an introduction by Bryce Beemer

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## TRANSLATORS' NOTE

Wanit Charungkitanan's classic short story "The Capital" was translated as a classroom project for an advanced Thai translation course (THAI 415) at the University of Hawai'i by Noah Viernes, Jennifer Thepsenavong, and Bryce Beemer. The finished project was edited and slightly abridged by Bryce Beemer. The translators would like to thank Professor Yuphaphann Hoonchamlong for her tirelessly inventive language instruction and her assistance and encouragement throughout this translation project. Professor Yuphaphann's class was designed to harmonize with another innovative UH course taught by John McGlynn on "the art of translation." Artistic lessons from that class directly filtered into this translation project. For this reason the translators would also like to extend thanks to John McGlynn and to Paul Rausch, the Coordinator for the UH Center for Southeast Asian Studies, for organizing and promoting so many translation projects here in Hawaii.

## Editor's Introduction

Wanit Charungkitanan's short story "The Capital" is considered one of the greatest examples of Thai social realism, a school of writing in Thailand and elsewhere, mostly written by the activist left and designed to bring attention to subaltern voices and the struggles of the downtrodden. It is a darkly comic tale of an economic migrant slowly driven insane by Bangkok's notoriously horrible rush hour traffic. "The Capital" was one of many well-received short stories written by Wanit between 1978 and 1983 and published together in his SEA Write Award winning collection "In the Same Alleyway" (*Soi Diawkan*).

While "The Capital" is a classic of social realism, social realism does not define his style, or his politics. Wanit is a master of light satire and a popular columnist in newspapers and magazines; he frequently writes

women's fiction, TV soap opera scripts, poetry and romantic fiction. The overriding theme of his work is the conflict in Thai society between traditional culture and modernity. His partisan interest is in the preservation of tradition. This light strain of conservatism demarcates an ideological distance between Wanit and most other Thai authors of social realism. Returning to the eclectic nature of Wanit's writing, it is interesting to note that many stories from "In the Same Alleyway" deals with the very unreal world of the supernatural. But even in Wanit's ghost stories, specters symbolize the voices and values of the past that are trampled down and angered by the ill-considered forces of modernization.

Wanit was born in 1949 in what was then the rural province of Supanburi. His father was a Chinese immigrant; his mother a Sino-Thai market woman. His fam-

ily climbed from the working to middle class when his father was promoted by the local rice mill from barge operator to mill manager. Wanit originally pursued a career in art. In 1974 he left for California to study printmaking at an American university. While studying, Wanit made a name for himself writing satirical essays about American life for several Thai periodicals. The success of these essays encouraged a move from art to writing. While a champion of tradition, Wanit's own life is a paragon of modern day success. He parlayed his creative energy and popular literary success into lucrative executive positions in media, publishing, and television production companies. He is one of the creative founders of Grammy Entertainment, Thailand's extremely successful multi-media juggernaut.

The short story "The Capital" is striking for how well it has held up over the last twenty plus years. Traffic in Thailand is still terrible and the buses are overcrowded nightmares during rush hour. The story remains comically evocative for anyone who has ever boarded a Bangkok bus during the rainy season. One thing, however, has changed for the better. Northeastern migrants to the capital, the *Isaan* or Lao people that fill so many of the working class jobs in Bangkok, no longer conceal their rural culture, half-embarrassedly, from their ostensibly more sophisticated Bangkok cousins. Compared to two decades ago, they are loud (Lao'd) and proud. The Bangkok of 2007 constantly rocks to the sound of *Isaan* country music. Today, if a lonely, golden-throated Lao boy started singing on a crowded bus, many passengers would know the words and surely join in.

## The Capital

Another day goes by...

...I thought as I straightened my desk and walked straight from work to the bus stop. I was too exhausted and disheartened to notice what was going on around me. There was nothing worth looking at anyway. It's always the same after work, a crush of grim people going to and fro. Each face an expression of grumpiness and gloom.

I halted briefly at a construction site for shop houses. A none-too-small stone chunk crashed down in front of me. If I'd been walking just a bit faster it would've struck my head. It wasn't big enough to crack my skull, but it would have given me a lump. I looked up to see

people busily working above. No one cared that a stone had nearly grazed my skull.

A change in the wind signaled rain. The sky darkened with clouds. I picked up my pace wanting to get home before the rain, but it was impossible. My only hope was to get on a bus before the deluge.

As always, people crowded around the bus stop, no one taking notice of anyone else. Groups stood together chitchatting, watching the buses roll into the bus stop. At the same time there were others, like myself, standing alone and watching attentively for their bus to come along. I prayed with my heart that my bus would have just a bit of space.

Praying is better than nothing. And look at that! A bus comes my way, but jam-packed.

I squeezed up and got one foot on the outside step. My one hand grasped the handle inside the bus door; the other clutched a book to my chest. I felt so lucky that I caught a bus before the rain started splattering down.

Edging into the traffic circle, the bus jerked forward randomly. All sorts of vehicles were scrambling to be first into the circle. The cars were all bottlenecked up. A car and taxi struck one another. I hung from the bus as it toiled its way through the roundabout, leaving the chaos behind only to encounter another gummy situation at the next intersection.

The traffic stopped so long that I dropped down onto the road and stood there to ease my exhaustion. How could traffic move when the cars are this crisscrossed and confused? Stoplights had no meaning since cars couldn't move with the green. Cars were all clustered together in the middle of the intersection. Instead of yielding on a green light, cars rolled in unwilling to wait for the cars to clear the intersection. Vehicles crawled forward into the jam-up whenever the car in front of them made some headway. Then, when the too brief green light turned red, another slow moving flood of traffic entered from the other direction.

By the time the police arrived to wave the traffic through, drivers stuck in the middle of the intersection were despairing at one another. Nearly half an hour was spent stuck in that intersection. As for me, I'd become so physically exhausted I just wanted to lay right down on the congested road.

As soon as the bus was able to move, it began to drizzle. The bus progressed to the next stop. At the door where I was hanging, only one passenger got off quickly, while there were dozens of people waiting to board. As a result, before the passengers who wanted to get off could weave their way through the crowded bus, the whole thing went higgledy-piggledy because those people waiting to board the bus refused to move aside. Everyone was crowded at the door, myself included.

I refused to release my hand from the doorway, or move the foot that was perched on the stair. I didn't want to lose my spot on the bus and end up stuck in the rain under the eave of some building. While the scramble to board was going on, the driver pulled the bus away. Those people crowded at the door were buffeted by the bus and sent staggering. A middle-aged woman fell down. I had to hop along side the bus two or three times on one leg before I was able to pull myself up onto the outside stair.

I can't take it! My arm is completely exhausted. I try to squeeze myself into the bus until I could stand on the second step. The rain started to fall in fat drops. And the bus is baking hot because every window is shut. Each and every inch of my skin feels sticky. I try using my shoulder to whisk a prickly stream of sweat from my cheek.

The bus pulled into another bus stop. Two to three people got off. Due to the heavy rain, no one was waiting to squeeze in the door. So I wormed my way up the stairs and tried to press onto the back of the bus where there is more air to breath. The pushed passengers were not pleased, but I didn't care. They have a right

to their displeasure. I felt like I could faint due of the heat and the short supply of breathable air. The sweaty smell of those around me made me ever more nauseous.

I felt hungry. The traffic jam was such that it hardly moved. The rain poured down.

In exhaustion I shut my eyes. I grasped the bus's ceiling rail and rested my head on the crook of my arm. I can't understand why I have to suffer like this in Bangkok. I should get back out into the countryside. I should get back home and fish and dig clams and just live life one-day-to-the-next.



Bangkok  
Traffic by  
Paul Rausch

I'm especially exhausted today because my boss sent me all over the city running errands. I nearly dropped dead waiting to cross the Ratchaprasong intersection. I stood on the traffic island and nearly coughed up my lungs as poisonous exhaust from passing cars and revving engines covered me over. I did my utmost to hold my breath, but I could only do it for a short time. When I finally had to take a new breath exhaust particles drew towards my face. I had the real life experience of learning that filthy exhaust is without a trace of oxygen. Inhaling exhaust when my body really needed oxygen made me gag, made my ears ring, then I fainted.

I really want to get back to my home in the countryside. I really do. But I have no idea what I'd do there. There isn't any work. Except, as I mentioned earlier, fishing and clam digging, which really don't pay the bills. I can't find coolie work at the mill carrying things about on my back. My back isn't up to the job.

The bus rolled forward a little. The rain was still falling and the water started overflowing onto the road. As a result, cars began to break down and the jam-up tightened.

I can't begin to tell you how hot and steamy that bus was getting. Every person I could see was twitching with anxiety. The bus had been stuck for a while now and the air was stifling. In truth the rain should have helped cool the bus, but this bus was packed tight and every window was shut. The collective body heat brought the bus up to the baking temperature. The longer the bus sat, the hotter it got, until I thought I would go mad.

My legs were tired and I felt like sitting down. There is no sign of anyone getting up. At the center of the bus, two children and their mother clung to the back of a chair. The young man sitting in front of them had no thought of offering them the seat. I don't blame him. If I was sitting right now, I'm not sure I would offer my seat to anyone.

I continued to squeeze myself along until I stood at the rear of the bus. I turned my head around toward the back so I could breathe more easily.

It's been an hour already since I boarded this bus, but it's still a long way before I reach home. I closed my tired eyes and give a dejected sigh.

It's at times like these that I want to go back home to the country. I don't understand why people crowd into Bangkok. If I had a choice, I would not live in this big,

terrible city. But that's just it... There are probably jillions of people who think as I do, but they have a choice.

The bus toiled on to another stop. In fact, it sat at the bus stop for a long time, only no one knew until the driver shifted the bus into gear, and the fare collector shouted for passengers to get off.

A man sitting farthest to the back shifted his body. Because I was facing the back of the bus, I took notice before anyone else. I gave him silent thanks as he stood up with some difficulty, as there was no free space for him to easily support himself. He had to place one hand on the seat cushion and grab at the railing with the other.

I stretched my leg out to reserve the seat because two to three others in the section shifted as if they would move to sit down. I feel sorry for those people. I apologize. Please let me sit first. I can't take it anymore. I am going to faint from exhaustion and starvation and weakness.

I sat down and leaned my head up against the head rest. I was determined to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come. It was so hot the sweat dripped down my shirt and stuck to my legs due to the broiling temperature in my heavy-weight jeans.

Unable to sleep, I sat straight and placed a book on my lap. I closed my eyes to pray that the bus would move a little faster. The heat and smelly sweat was uncomfortable beyond all description. I felt like some prisoner stuffed into the bus to be taken to who knows where, certainly nowhere good.

Oy... I groaned silently, as the bus moved on a bit and then got stuck all over again. Seven people were sitting next to me on the bench seat at the rear of this bus. I examined each one's expression thinking that none could be feeling any differently than me. I was sitting three seats in from the door. The first person, sitting closest to the door, was a guy with a gullible, starry-eyed sort of look, meaning he likely came from the countryside. He probably hasn't been in Bangkok long, probably from the Northeast. His appearance led me to this conclusion.

His shirt was unbuttoned down three buttons such that one could see the sweat on his muscled chest. He was stout and likely came here as a construction worker. I didn't know what else to do, my thoughts drifted around aimlessly.

The next person over, sitting beside me, was another guy. His look was similar to mine. He was probably a low-level office worker like me. The next person over from me was a woman in a tube skirt. She was probably a market lady. Next to her was another younger woman who worked for a company as well. Her outfit was a matching purple uniform, so she likely worked at a department store or, barring that, worked in retail. The next one over was a man in a t-shirt, but I can't guess what kind of work he does. The final person was probably a college guy; he dressed a lot like a student.

I sat watching them a while, before closing my eyes again. The bus was again at a standstill since a car broke down in the middle of the intersection. The rain let up a bit. I looked outside the window and saw a man pushing a car, but it was hopeless because he was hemmed in on all sides by traffic. Were he to push it forward it would likely crunch into one of the surrounding vehicles.

My heart went out to him. He was drenched with rain. The people in my bus looked on with faces empty of emotion. They may even have felt that he was getting what he deserved.

Is it even possible that this is just the normal course of events?

How will I withstand this torture any longer? I've been in this bus almost two hours. It's hot as hell and it ain't getting any better. The steaminess is giving me prickly heat. I blow on it without any hope.

No one on this bus is talking to anyone. The people standing in front of me are all smooshed together. All stand silently; some have drooping heads, while others look aimlessly ahead. Some people are watching the road fill with water. I know that every person on this bus is exercising patience. I think the human capacity for extreme patience in a torturous situation like this is no laughing matter. No one is complaining. No one is talking. And no one tries to escape off the bus.

If this bus was a criminal transport, FINE. I'd like it to drive right out of this city. It could go any old place where the traffic doesn't jam up like this... a place where cool wind can blow. A place where you don't have to shut every bus window tight until the steamy heat nearly melts your body down.

I'm about to lose my patience. I'm sitting down, so I think I'm better off than the half that is standing. But the steamy heat is driving me mad.

I miss my home in the countryside. I miss my girlfriend. If only I had a little money and a job near home, I wouldn't have to move around. I wouldn't have to sit through this tormenting torture. I could marry my girl.

Why do the passengers on the bus sit mutely, myself included? Why isn't anyone talking, chatting for fun, having a conversation instead of sitting motionless through this torture? The rain is drizzling but the heat in this hell bus has not diminished. Somebody sing! Why hasn't someone stepped forward to sing? Let's all pretend this is a sightseeing bus heading out to the country. Let's all sing. Let's sing! Why sit still like a bunch of crazies? What is the use of sitting motionless through this torture? Let's all sing!

No one sang out like I wanted... A country song, sing a country song. It can be any song, a fast song or a slow song. Please let's just sing together. Quickly. How about *"Rain Falls, Traffic Jam"* by Surachai? Someone, anyone, sing a song, please. Sornkiri's song *"Flood"* would be all right. *"Flooding, my dear, you say is better than drought, but I think drought is better than flooding..."* Sing, please. Sing, please. I'll do back-up vocals.

On the inside I am imploring. The bus shifted again, stuck at another intersection. Lengthy, lengthy lingering... I think I might decompose. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I don't think any patience remains in me. I should get off the bus and eat a plate of noodles. Sit happily in a noodle shop, wait for conditions to improve, and then wait for the next bus.

*I can't sit on this hellhole bus a moment longer.  
 "...the sweet smell of the Acacia flower,  
 richly mixed with the scent of hay...  
 ...the mushrooms creep up the Yanang vine  
 I see the water-lilies floating  
 along the surface of the water..."*

The enchanting sound of the country song *"Moon-rak Luk thung"* came from somewhere. Who turned on the radio? I hesitated as I was standing and remained in my seat... Such a nice *'luk thung'* country voice. It's that young northeastern guy. My main man! Sing on. Sing on. I smiled at him as I looked on, but he didn't take notice. He closed his eyes and rested his hands together on his lap. He could sing well, it was pretty.

*"...I'd like to pluck one up and breath in its the scent,  
 I reach for it but cannot reach  
 I'd like to transform into a bumblebee,  
 so I can caress that beautiful waterlily..."*

It was so melodic. My heart brimmed with admiration.

I forgot all the stress brought on by this suffocating heat. Then there came the sound of loud giggling coming from the people standing in front of me. I looked to see who it was. I cursed the person who made that laugh. All the passengers seated around me and everyone that I saw stared at the young singer. But he didn't seem to care, he didn't open his eyes.

*"The sweet scent of the earth mixes with the rain..."*

Wow. My heart drifted off to the countryside the moment he sang this line.

*"...and with aroma of beautiful cheeks..."*

I thought longingly of my girlfriend. She was as lovable, as I was destitute. I didn't have enough money to marry her.

*"The soft sound of the flute whistled through rows of the sugar palm tree,  
the enchanting country songs of country folk drift softly in..."*

It's like this...just like this. In my rural province, in my backyard, the sugar palm trees are in rows. I can play the flute. I am a singer in the *ramwong* dance troupe near my home.

*"Take the fishing rod and hook on some bait..."*

Do you see? It's about going fishing. Getting in the boat to go fishing. I hummed along. I couldn't restrain myself. There was a girl with pretty cheeks a'fishing. Dreams. I was having a private dream, one in which my girlfriend gets on a boat to go fishing with me. A dreamy dream I can only dream about.

*"Our golden abundant fields.  
I hear enchanting country love songs from the village fields  
The sweet, vibrating timbre..."*

I shut my eyes. I didn't want to hear the people who were snickering. This young man was making me happy and I didn't want to see the looks of people who thought he was nuts. I thought that the atmosphere on the bus was getting better, *weirdly* better. I didn't like the sound of snickering, but even that put a little life into this bus that was hot as hell's abyss,

*"Ohh! The flame tree flower..."* Came the faint, enticing sound of country music. *"...the perfumy smell of your sweet cheeks..."*

It's over. C'mon old friend, repeat the first verse. I'm not sated. One more go-round. Sing on. My main man wouldn't sing. He sat, as he was before with his eyes closed. I started clapping loudly. I was the only one. Then came clapping sounds from a few others sitting on the bench seat. One was the lady in the tube skirt who sat beside me, and two or three others who I couldn't see were clapping in the middle of the bus. From the front of the bus came the sound of chattering conversation. Then there was the voice of the fare collector laughing out, "This sounds great."

The bus rolled forward a short distance and turned into to a bus stop. Just then a young man started exiting the bus, but before he did he turned toward the young singer and howled, "Nut job!"

I'm not sure how it all happened, but before the kid could step off the bus, I leapt up and grabbed him around the collar. I barked, "You're the crazy one, shithead!"

The kid looked startled. His face lost color. When I saw that he had no fight in him, I let go of his collar and dropped back into my seat. The bus moved on. The young singer sat still and didn't open his eyes. There was silence on the bus. I gave the young singer a look that implored him to keep singing, but he just sat quietly.

Once again, the bus rolled forward into a congested intersection, halted before it could turn. If we could turn onto that street, we'd be in the clear, but we'll be stuck here for long while. There was no way through this intersection. The steamy, baking heat was still here... Keep on singing, my brother. Sing! Sing your heart out! Sing on! My heart shouted this to him. Lots of people were sneaking looks at me. They must've been surprised to see me lash out at that young guy, but I didn't care about their looks. I glanced back in the direction of my young singer. I prayed for him to keep singing.

*"Because I'm destitute,  
I'm invisible to everyone"*

Hey, hey... it's "*Far From Home*" by Khawanchai Phetcharoiet. My prayer materialized. My main man heard me. His voice was loud, reverberating through the bus. And there was no snickering. I was happy.

*"I've got to depart from home,  
from my mother and father,  
who wait attentively for my return..."*

It's just the same with my mother. The young man's yearning voice resonated with my own heart.

*"I had to leave my love,  
the forests and the fields,  
to come find work..."*

My main man. I'm right there with you.

*"Because I'm destitute,  
I must struggle forth to the great city.  
My melancholy heart trembles..."*

Melancholy... I feel the melancholia. Alas, my love. Alas, my girlfriend. Who knows when I'll get back home to marry her?

*"Working with the sweat flowing wet,  
a darkened face,  
I work on because I'm without means..."*

That's right, Comrade. I'm the same. You're right, my main man. Could we be true friends? I looked on with admiration. The young singer was unconcerned by those around him. His eyes stayed closed. I stared straight at his face. Many others on the bus did the same. The fare collector trotted over and stood on the stairs smiling and staring at my young singer.

*"Malai, my love..."*

This! This is how it should be. *Luk thung* singers should be just like this. The haunting vibrato sound of his voice trailed off at the end of the phrase. I was lost in the moment, tapping my finger against my book.

*"Don't reproach me for being away  
its because I'm poor that that I must leave you.  
When I'm far from you sweetness, don't harshly  
opine  
If I can escape this destitution, honey,  
it will all work out fine."*

That's right my little country garland named Malai. That's right my tender Malai flower. My sweetie's name isn't "Malai," but right this moment I'd really like to give her that name. The young singer shifted. A single tear ran down his weathered cheek. My heart sank. Was it really a tear? It was. The lashes of one eye were soaked into clumps. Alas, my main man. Like the singer, I choked up. My eyes welled.

*"Because I'm far from you.  
My mind is carelessly drifting."*

Drifting... I am drifting. Is there anyone out there like me that isn't adrift? Far from their true love, and

with no chance for union...

*"I miss her. I miss her all the time  
I'm distracted, uneasy, restless at heart..."*

My eyes gave the sign they would spill up tears, while my boy's tears flowed down like a stream. I felt so deeply moved by his trembling vibrato voice. Especially when he sings, *"I miss her. I miss her all the time."* I choked up. The bus began to creep forward.

*"I'm far off, but my heart is near.  
Please, please don't ever stray  
while I'm off so far away."*

About this, I'm not so certain. My girl and I have been apart for a long time. We haven't been writing to each other. I applauded when he stopped singing and the sound of clapping followed mine all around the bus. I tilted my head down, scrunched my eyes, and pretended to freshen my face, covertly wiping the tears away. I didn't want others to know I was crying.

Applause and loud laughter continued as the bus turned quickly down a connecting road.

The bus came to a stop. The young singer got up. The fair collector observed this and called out to the driver, "Hold up. The singer is getting off now."

Everyone turned to look, applause sounded again. My young singer took no notice of the clapping. The trail of tears was still damp on his face.

He started down the stairs. I wasn't to my stop yet, but I followed after him. Off the bus, he readied himself to forge on. I had no idea what I should do next. Should I greet him or just start talking?

"Excuse me. Wait a second." I asked in a rush of words, "I need to know, have you gone insane?"

"No..." The young singer shook his head, "but all things considered, I wish I was crazy." He answered and then disappeared into a crowd pushing to get onto the bus.



# Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: the Diary of Dang Thuy Tram

Book Review

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Brett B. Bodemer has an MA in French and is currently pursuing a degree in Library and Information Science at the University of Hawai'i. He lived and worked in Hanoi from November 2006 through November 2007, where he translated and edited English and French materials for the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, including the exhibit on loan "We have eaten the forest – George Condominas in Sar Luk." (bbodemer@hawaii.edu)

**Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: the Diary of Dang Thuy Tram**, translated by Andrew X. Pham; introduction by Frances Fitzgerald; notes by Jane Barton Griffith, Robert Whitehurst, and Dang Kim Tram. New York: Harmony Books. 1st American edition, 2007.

Dang Thuy Tram's *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*, published by Harmony Books, is remarkable for many reasons. Not least of which is the fact that it exists at all. This revelatory diary kept by a female doctor serving with the North Vietnamese forces traces her experiences from 1968 to 1970, prior to her untimely battlefield death. Her journal, discovered by American troops, should have been burned. American forces had standing orders to destroy any uncovered Vietnamese documents of no discernible military value. But Dang Thuy Tram's memoir was spared the burn pile by a disobedient American military intelligence officer. Or perhaps this American was being more perceptive than disobedient, for one of the many insights yielded by this war-time diary is the social dynamic of resistance and its very dependence on a strongly woven network of personal relationships and commitment. Surely,

such details are of inestimable military value.

This is just one of many interesting facets of this complex diary, which, after being belatedly restored to the author's mother in Hanoi, was published in Vietnamese in 2005 and quickly became a publishing sensation. More than 430,000 copies were sold in less than two years, a phenomenal number in a country where "few books sell more than 5,000 copies" (xviii). Vietnamese readers found in it a less ideologically sanitized version of the war than had been previously available, with several passages offering poignant critiques of the Communist Party. It proves equally interesting as autobiography, history, sociology, and political science. Andrew X. Pham, with help from his father (a Hanoian familiar with Dang Thuy Tram's linguistic milieu), has rendered an English translation that is readable and captures the emotional tenor of the original that is charged with passion, idealism, sentimentality, and the brutal carnage encountered daily by a doctor serving in a battlefield clinic.

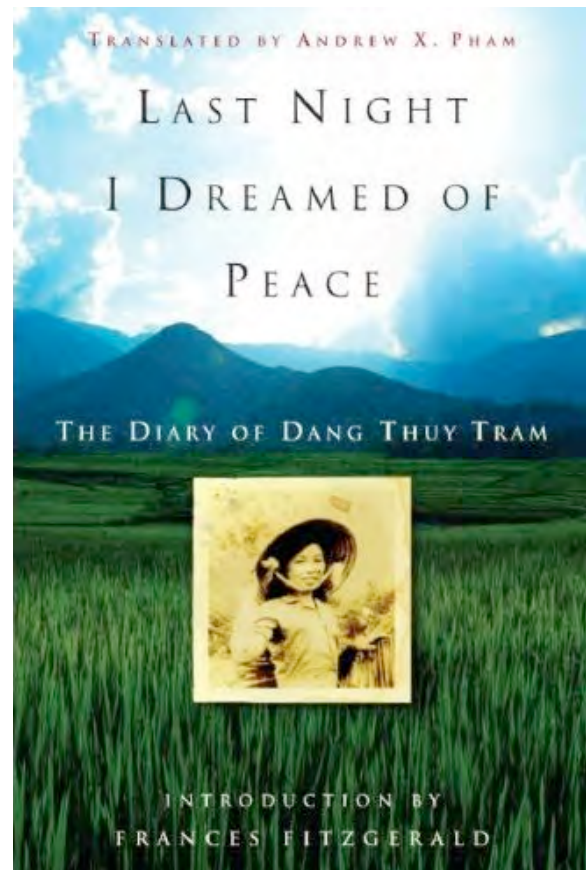
Frances Fitzgerald's concise introduction is complemented by a judicious selection of footnotes provided by Jane Barton Griffith, Robert Whitehurst, and the author's sister, Dang Kim Tram. If there is any flaw in the diary's presentation, it is that the editors' decision-making process is not fully transparent. For example, it isn't clear whether Dang Thuy Tram or the editors provided the epigraphs preceding each of the two sections, or even whether the author made the decision to divide the diary into two discrete books.

Dang Thuy Tram was twenty-four when she volunteered to serve as a doctor in a National Liberation Front battlefield hospital in Quang Ngai Province (the same province that witnessed the notorious slaughter later called the My Lai Massacre.) This book is comprised of her surviving diary (two earlier journals were lost while eluding American forces) and extends from April 1968 to an entry made two days prior to her death in June of 1970. She records the suffering and destruction encountered in the war-zone: bombings, raids, and the razing of whole villages. In one nightmarish account she witnessed the death of a soldier accidentally hit by one of the phosphorous rounds fired by opposing forces to mark forests for subsequent defoliation. The soldier smoldered for days before dying. Furthermore, Dang Thuy Tram slept underground for almost two years, and the last portions of the diary recount multiple relocations of her clinic as American forces drew nearer and nearer.

Yet the diary is much more than a chronicle of this war's quotidian grimness. It serves as an emotional register. Dang Thuy Tram is conflicted in many ways, and her entries yield a complex portrait of the emotional and intellectual life of the woman who wrote them. Raised in a well-educated Hanoi family (both parents were physicians) and sent to elite French-founded schools, she voices her frustration at not being fully accepted by her associates in Quang Ngai. Her narrative strikes a plaintive tone when she is refused admission into the Communist Party. One of the recurrent tensions of the diary stems from what she perceives as a conflict between her "bourgeois sentimentality" and her "revolutionary spirit," and she often expresses guilt for her inclinations to privilege her private emotions over her revolutionary commitment.

In fact the diary suggests that her private feelings and her revolutionary spirit flow from the same source, and that both are similarly embedded in her intense and

complicated interpersonal relations. She recounts episodes of homesickness for her family and friends in Hanoi in very affective language, but also writes similarly of her relationships with her students (she taught in the clinic as well), her patients and her associates.



She often strives to categorize these relationships on a qualitative level, running the gamut from: 1) a physician's love for a patient; 2) a sister's love for a brother; 3) the warmth of camaraderie; and 4) pure and sincere friendship. Yet, when she describes many of her relationships (and much of the diary is devoted to interpersonal relationships) her language is unremittingly ardent. Her continuous effort to clarify and understand the nature of these relationships suggests a never-resolved struggle with uncertainty. When people she has come to know are injured, captured or killed in the fighting—as many of them are—she calls on herself in an emotional language aimed to heighten her determination, utilizing her intense personal connections as a springboard to solidify her will.

In Dang Thuy Tram's diary it is the intensity of feeling and the resolve to see the war through that emerge as the most salient features of her writing. The translator in his note discreetly apologizes for the register of the diary's language as being typical of its time and place. But it is this very blend of ideological and affective language interspersed with reflections, doubts, and the need for reassurance that renders the book such a fascinating read. In contrast to passages that refer to roads "of blood and fire" the author sometimes pauses to enjoy moments of peace as sunlight falls on bamboo, only to recoil from this feeling with a twinge of remorse for having found a moment's peace.

On August 5<sup>th</sup>, approximately a year before being shot and killed, Thuy wrote: "perhaps I will meet the enemy, and perhaps I will fall, but I hold my medical bag firmly regardless, and people will feel sorry for this girl who was sacrificed for the revolution when she was still young and full of verdant dreams" (146).

Her story is undoubtedly tragic and readers might justifiably feel sorry for her. Yet, pity is not the dominant note struck in this diary. My own response was great admiration (and perhaps even envy) for this young doctor who felt things more intensely in 26 years than most people do in a life span twice as long. Though her diary *can* teach us about aspects of the American war in Vietnam, about the daily life of combatants, and how the will to social resistance can be steeled by steady and inconclusive losses, what one really takes away from this book is the sense that, even though she died so young, here was a woman who felt, acted, and reflected deeply: a woman, in short, who lived.



# New and Emerging Research Tools for Graduate Students

## THE EDITORS

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### SYNOPSIS

The editors have decided to return to the subject of emerging research tools for graduate students. Due to the fact that these research tools are rarely advertised outside of their specialized fields we have decided to once again promote them to our graduate student audience.

### Asia Source

<http://www.asiasource.org/>

Run by the Asia Society, Asia Source is a comprehensive website that offers links to a virtual cornucopia of information on Asia and Southeast Asia. Links provide access to news, articles, food, books, calendars, maps and special reports, as well as dictionaries, country profiles, historical chronologies and information about living, working and traveling in the region. It is an indispensable research tool for scholars, students and travelers.

### Ecole Francaise D'Extreme-Orient (EFEO)

<http://www.efeo.fr/index.shtml>

The French School of the Far East's (EFEO) online home offers access to information and resources on the geographic region stretching from India to Japan. Rooted in the colonial period and currently operating under the aegis of the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research, it hosts web pages in both French and English connecting researchers for over a century of archaeological, ethnographic, historical and sociological research. The site includes links to the EFEO's past publications, events, in-country branch offices, exhibits and current events.

### Khmer Renaissance

[http://www.khmerenaissance.info/resources\\_tools.html](http://www.khmerenaissance.info/resources_tools.html)

This Khmer-language website is hosted by the Norfolk, Connecticut based Friends of Khmer Culture organization. It covers the advances in social and cultural issues made since the fall of the Pol Pot Regime. The website is updated frequently and offers links to cultural resources management, environmental and social issues.

### Indonesian Newspaper Project by the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation

[http://niod.x-cago.com/maleise\\_kranten/papers.do](http://niod.x-cago.com/maleise_kranten/papers.do)

This electronic resource is invaluable for students who want access to newspapers produced in Indonesia during World War II. Technologically innovative, the website provides easy ways to search an extensive list of Indonesian periodicals, offering the specific date ranges available and a simple method to print any articles being viewed. Searches allow one to view full pages of the periodicals, or single articles, listed by title. Freed from the toils of microfilm and microfiche, The Indonesian Newspaper Project website offers re-

searchers a unique and enjoyable means to study Indonesia's periodicals in the late 1930s and 1940s, facilitating study of the period through its accessibility and ease of use.

### Royal Tropical Institute of the Netherlands (KIT), Tropenmuseum Digital Collection database

<http://ccindex.kit.nl/index.asp?lang=en>

The Tropenmuseum Collection contains over 254,000 pieces, including material objects, photos, drawings, paintings and documents, a good portion of which are included in this digitized, searchable public archive. The plethora of historical documents and photos from the Dutch colonial era make this a good resource for Southeast Asianists interested in historical research and material culture. Photos of collection pieces shown on the website are available for purchase in JPEG format or hard copy, and access to the full collection is granted to museum professionals on request.

### Colonial Historical Map Collection

<http://www.kit.nl/smartsite.shtml?id=4731>

The KIT has digitized its collection of maps from the Dutch East Indies, the Dutch Antilles and Surinam from 1850 – 1950. The collection contains over 15,000 maps and 150 atlases from the period, available in high resolution digital files that can be resized without sacrificing detail. Some maps are available for purchase as JPEG files or hard copy shipped from the Netherlands.

Permission to use maps for theses and dissertations can be obtained by contacting the collection curator directly.

### Indopedia

[http://editthis.info/indopedia/Main\\_Page](http://editthis.info/indopedia/Main_Page)

Jennifer Epley started *Indopedia* in October 2006, which is a free website based on Wikipedia-like technology and dedicated to Indonesian Studies. Visitors do not have to be registered or have a formal account to view or contribute information. Postings are generally anonymous except for the Directory of Scholars. IP addresses are listed in the log of recent changes, however. The main pages of *Indopedia* are as follows: How to Use *Indopedia*, Conferences, Dictionaries, Directory of Scholars, Funding Resources, Living Abroad, Province-Specific Information, and Research Resources. Each page contains numerous sub-headings and further linked pages. Further contributions to *Indopedia* are welcome and can be sent via email to [administratorindopedia@hotmail.com](mailto:administratorindopedia@hotmail.com).

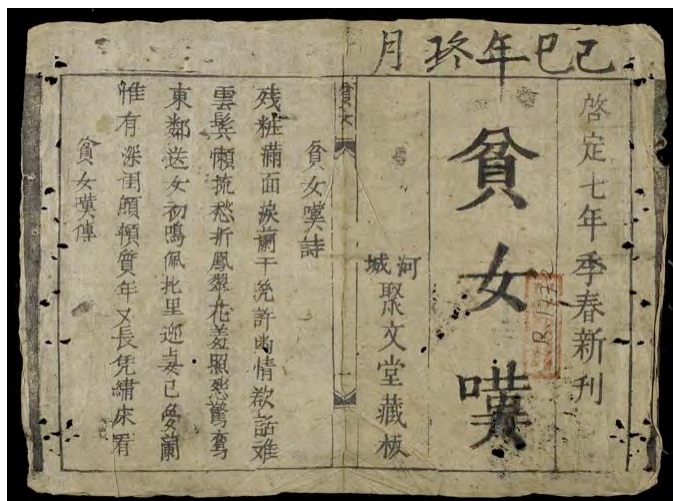
### CORMOSEA Website and the Southeast Asia Digital Library

<http://www.cormosea.org/>

<http://sea.lib.niu.edu/>

The Committee on Research Materials on Southeast Asia (CORMOSEA) is a committee of the Southeast Asia Council (SEAC) of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS). It was established to enhance the collections of Southeast Asia research materials and to

assist in making them widely available to researchers nationwide. The CORMOSEA website <http://www.cormosea.org/> includes links to library collections, research networking sites and other valuable information for Southeast Asianists. One of the ongoing projects is the Southeast Asia Digital Library <http://sea.lib.niu.edu/>, which is accessible from the main CORMOSEA page and hosted by the NIU libraries. The SEA Digital Library aims to provide access to a wide variety of research materials, including selected books, images, videos and bibliographic indexes from across the region. From the main page, one can access re-



A Han-Nom manuscript from the Han-Nom Special Collection Digitization Project in the Southeast Asia Digital Library at the CORMOSEA website



*Mask from the Eastward Bound exhibit on the Tropenmuseum website.*

who are passionate about music. All interviews are in English. The New Music From Indonesia site is highly recommended to anyone interested in music and contemporary Indonesia. Its interviewees are creating, as the title indicates, the new music of Indonesia.

sources such as Historical Photographs of Cambodia and Palm-leaf Manuscripts of Thailand. There is also a Video Archive with TV programs from Indonesia including a sitcom, a drama series and a popular religious program. See this link for more information on the Indonesian TV project, which is under the stewardship of Rohayati Paseng of the University of Hawai'i's Southeast Asia Collection at Hamilton Library: <http://sea.lib.niu.edu/indotelevision.html>.

## **New Music From Indonesia**

<http://www.equinoxdmd.com/podcast.html>

The New Music From Indonesia website provides weekly fifteen minute podcasts, each featuring one up-and-coming musician or band from Indonesia. A great introduction to the lively and dynamic music scene in Indonesia, New Music From Indonesia is not necessarily restricted to any one genre - a quick survey of past interviews reveals rock, blues, metal, indie, jazz, punk, and rock bands. Each podcast provides a glimpse into the personalities and interests of Indonesian musicians