

Thailand

Living Buddhism: Mind, self, and emotion in a Thai community

By JULIA CASSANITI

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015. Pp. 232. Illustrations, Glossary, References, Index.

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Winner of the 2016 Stirling Prize for Best Published Work in Psychological Anthropology (Society for Psychological Anthropology), Julia Cassaniti's *Living Buddhism: Mind, self, and emotion in a Thai community* has been acclaimed for its attention to religion as lived in the everyday lives of Buddhists and Christians in a small town in twenty-first century northern Thailand. Written in a journalistic style at times bordering upon travelogue and memoir, Cassaniti makes the book accessible to a wide audience. One of the book's main strengths lies in Cassaniti's ability to illustrate the affective tones of the abstract Buddhist concepts of impermanence, suffering and not-self as they are understood and embodied in the people she studies, lives with, and befriends. The intimate relationships Cassaniti forged over the course of her many years of doing research for this book has allowed her to provide detailed case studies that nicely illustrate the complexities of applying Buddhist concepts to everyday life.

It is this strength that encouraged me to assign this book in an undergraduate course on Buddhism in Southeast Asia that I taught last year. I thought the book was suited for this particular course because, instead of beginning the book with a standard introduction to Buddhism and its main tenets, Cassaniti jumps right into a case study that provides the reader with a snapshot of Buddhism as it is enacted in the everyday circumstances of peoples' lives. Cassaniti is not an expert in Buddhist Studies and was not trained as one. Despite this (or perhaps because of this) she makes theoretical concepts of impermanence and not-self, among others, readily understandable to a classroom of students with no prior knowledge of Buddhism. My students expressed their appreciation for this in their discussions and writings about the book. Instead of dictating what '*anicca*' (impermanence) and '*anatta*' (not-self) are, for example, Cassaniti helps the reader understand such concepts more naturally by providing the reader with anecdotes of how such ideas are understood, expressed, and shared.

The strength of the book's introduction, however, can also be considered its main weakness. The introduction lacks a theoretical or methodological contribution to major issues in the fields of anthropology and religious studies, as well as in studies on emotion in religion more broadly. Well-written, ethnographic monographs are important for giving readers insight into lived religious experiences, but I would have liked Cassaniti to more explicitly state why this study is relevant to an academic audience and why we should invest our time in reading it. The author devotes the very last three pages of the entire book to a section entitled, 'Why we should care'. This should have gone in the introduction. Indeed, the entire chapter that makes up the 'Conclusion' should have gone into the introductory chapter. A similar lack of

engagement with scholarly literature and specifically those theories relating to religion and emotion can be found throughout the book. We see hints in the footnotes and the sources consulted that appear in the bibliography, but nowhere is there an explicit discussion of how the ethnographic data engage with scholarship on religion and emotion to advance or challenge the field. Bringing the discussions from the footnotes up to the body of the text would have gone a long way in adding some theoretical depth to the already fine ethnographic narrative.

But none of this takes away from the fact that I will assign the book again in my course this year for it is clearly a work my students connect with. The colourful cast of characters that appear throughout the book and the various ways their culturally specific responses (not to mention the author's own) allow for a rich discussion of issues relating to religion, emotion, mental states, family dynamics, and gender. For those who enjoyed Sid Brown's *The journey of one Buddhist nun: Even against the wind* (2001) and Nancy Eberhardt's *Imagining the course of life: Self-transformation in a Shan Buddhist community* (2006), Julia Cassaniti's *Living Buddhism: Mind, self, and emotion in a Thai Community* is definitely something to read.

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Siam's new detectives: Visualising crime and conspiracy in modern Thailand

By SAMSON LIM

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Samson Lim's book is a specialised historical study of crime, the police force, and the visualisation of evidence in twentieth and twenty-first century Thailand. Beyond its comprehensive description of these developments, the strength of Lim's work is its methodological approach, which involves treating visual materials as productive sites of meaning through close analysis of their formal qualities.

The structure of Lim's text develops the line of reasoning produced by this methodological focus in a clear and logical manner. His first chapter succinctly outlines the context from which new methods of policing emerged, including the crime waves of the early twentieth century and the subsequent establishment of Siam's first police force. Later chapters are divided according to the source material under consideration. For instance, chapter 2 deals with material evidence and its documentation in statistics, photographs, reports and fingerprints; chapter 3, maps of crime scenes; chapter 4, re-enactments of criminal activities; and finally, chapter 5, visualisations of supposed networks of conspiracy.

Lim's text is replete with case studies recounted in meticulous detail, drawn from materials from the National Archives of Thailand, the Library and Museum of the Attorney General's Office of Thailand and various Thai-language newspapers. The author's contention that analogies may be found between fictional depictions of