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Monastery, Monument, Museum: Sites and Artifacts of Thai Cultural Memory

MAURIZIO PELEGGI

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“How plausible [. . .] is it to assume the existence of a shared Thai cultural memory?” (p. 4). This is the promising question that sets Thailand historian Maurizio Peleggi’s latest work, *Monastery, Monument, Museum*, into motion.

The monograph carries on with the author’s previous work on material and visual culture in the kingdom with a narrative that aims to bring memory studies into a dialogue with a vast array of Thai sources. Peleggi’s ambitious goal is to “conceptualize cultural memory not as a storeroom or archive of tangible and intangible materials, but, rather, as a dual process of recollection and reinscription,” whereby “(a)ny memorial act—individual as well as collective, concrete as well as symbolic—modifies the preexisting mnemonic landscape either by adding to it or by intentionally altering it” (p. 5). The author has also made the ambitious choice to consider sites and artifacts ranging from rock art to street art installations, and over a period spanning the pre-modern and contemporary.

Monumental in scope, *Monastery, Monument, Museum* makes for a surprisingly fast read. The Introduction makes up 9 pages, and there are eight chapters of approximately 20 pages each, which organize the book into three distinct parts.

The first part of the book, “Sacred Geographies,” explores Thai cultural memory by focusing on devotional art in the pre-modern and the early modern era. Chapter 1 takes the reader to sites across the kingdom that have been inscribed by religious myth—whether in the form of Buddha’s footprints or relics. Peleggi shows that myth becomes a form of memory that is embodied in the landscape. This is illustrated in the way that Thai Buddhists engage with sacred sites in an attempt to harvest the kind of magical potency that inhabits them (*saksit*).

The next chapter examines Buddha images that are regarded as embodiments of potency, and attributed magical powers and personalities. The author explores the circumstances under which apparently controversial processes—like the looting, displacement, replacement, borrowing, copying, and breaking of Buddha images—do or do not result in a loss of such extraordinary qualities.

Chapter 3 then investigates representations of foreigners—Westerners (*farang*) and Muslims (*khaek*)—in temple art, including wooden cabinets and murals. Here, Peleggi lets the court cosmology treatise of the *Three Worlds (Traiphumi)* guide his analysis. He therefore argues that foreigners in such contexts are mainly treated as opponents of the Dharma, and are thus used to fix the primacy of Buddhism over other world religions in Thai cultural memory. The author indicates that the royal court's adoption of "Western" cosmology during King Mongkut's reign (1851–68) is in reaction to European expansionism, and that it prompts a new search for national identity.

The second part of the volume, "Antiquities, Museums, and National History," is dedicated to the modern era. Peleggi argues that this is characterized by "the mergence and development of antiquarianism and eventually archeology, partly as the result of a shift in the elite's worldview and partly as a response to colonial and neocolonial projects of knowledge" (p. 5). Chapter 4 looks at the relationship between art and national identity in the face of European imperialism. By focusing mainly on the fourth, fifth, and sixth reigns of the Bangkok period (that is, the second half of the nineteenth century), he investigates how kings turned to the imported practice of antiquarianism in an attempt to rewrite the memory of Siam's past from a perspective that reflects European epistemological concerns.

Chapter 5 examines further the nexus between art and national identity by exploring how artifacts in museums of the 1920s were managed in response to dominant discourses of cultural evolutionism. The author argues that what was previously categorized as devotional images (*phrarup*) were then treated as antiquities (*boranwatthu*). This was because museum curators endeavored to create a cultural memory that testified to the "evolution" of the Thai people in accordance with (now-outdated) discourses of sociocultural evolutionism.

The problem of a search of origin within a nationalist narrative is also pronounced in Chapter 6. It deals with questions raised by the legacy of a non-Thai and non-Buddhist heritage in the light of the Ban Chiang excavations of the 1970s. Peleggi locates prehistory as a problematic feature in Thai memory, as its identity—especially problematized in a period of domestic and international political turmoil—does not always correspond to the nation's self-image.

The final part of the volume, "Discordant Mnemoscapes," explores the intersections between politics and memory in post-absolutism Thailand. Chapter 7 investigates the role of civic art in the period following the coup d'état that spelled the end of absolutism in 1932. Here, Peleggi examines the attempts of Thailand's new government to inscribe nationalist propaganda in Bangkok's landscape by seeking inspiration in Europe's monumental tradition—including, ambiguously, fascist civic art.

Chapter 8 concludes the book by focusing on art installations across a variety of media—including film, photography, performance, and ritual commemoration—from the 1990s onward. The author studies the forms of art that have emerged in response to the most infamous military-perpetuated massacres of the twentieth century, as well as to the political crisis and social polariza-

tion that has characterized the new millennium. He chooses to highlight the role of art in keeping the memory of state violence alive, ending his narrative on a melancholic albeit hopeful note on resistance.

Monastery, Monument, Museum is an accessible book that takes the reader on a journey into the making of Thailand's cultural memory. It deals with a dazzling wealth of materials and sources, and unravels along the way an impressive time framework. As a result, Peleggi has delivered a narrative that traces convincingly Thai cultural memory as embodied in sites and artifacts. As the author locates the development of a Thai cultural memory within greater processes of knowledge production to which Thai and foreign agents participate, he engages in an archeology of cultural memory, which often challenges standard narratives about sites and forms of art in the kingdom. I enjoyed Peleggi's insights on the role played by the US scholarly enterprise in shaping an identity of Thai prehistory during the Cold War. They reflected their own concerns with the Other in a period characterized by American imperialism and parallel struggles for democratization in Thailand. In addition to the author's main argument on cultural memory, I also appreciated his investigation of the role of the foreigner in art (Chapter 3), which I found to be an original, if somewhat still embryonal, contribution to Thai Studies, deserving of further research and attention.

Although this volume is obviously tailored to be reader-friendly, with brief chapters and jargon-free language, I found that the lineal temporal framework that organizes the narrative does not always render justice to the complexity of the material and the nuance of Peleggi's argument. At times, the chronological narrative seems to suggest that the "modern" simply overwrites the "pre-modern." This does not appear to be the case as the author himself observes, for example, that people in modern Thailand engage in practices, like the worship of sacred sites in search of potency, which are categorized as "premodern" (Chapter 1). I am similarly uncertain as to whether the adoption of a "Western" cosmology in the fourth reign necessarily replaces Buddhist cosmology, rather than dialoguing with it in more complex ways. Another instance in which I sense a too clear-cut dichotomy between the pre-modern and the modern is when the author writes that, in the modern era, "devotional images (*phrarup*) [. . .] acquired a novel epistemic status as antiquities (*borawatthu*)" (p. 87). I am reminded of those museum artifacts that are exhibited in the manner of antiquities and *simultaneously* offered flower garlands in the manner of devotional images.

With its gigantic scope and accessible format, *Monastery, Monument, Museum* makes for a gratifying read. It offers an original and unique perspective on cultural memory as seen in Thailand's sites and artifacts. The book is mandatory reading for anyone interested in Thai art and cultural history, as well as, more generally, in the role of memory in contemporary societies and especially the global South.

Edoardo Siani

Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University