

the age of television. However, Chapter 5 cautions against such a conclusion, for something gets concealed in all this imagination of nationhood mediated by the sense of the personal. *As If We Never Parted* projected past suffering of the nation through images of reaching toward normalcy—normal home, normal family, and normal life. Because this normalcy was framed as a matter of individuals, the viewer would easily neglect the structural cause behind these tragedies, whether it be poverty or exploitation. Such a narrative eventually “eases the guilt of the winner without providing the same sense of collective justice to the side of the loser” (p. 121). Nguyen-Thu sees this normalizing narrative as a form of governmentality, a neoliberal tendency that orients the conduct of people’s life.

The concluding chapter summarizes the book by foregrounding several sets of theoretical frameworks, such as globalization versus nationalism, nationalism versus neoliberalism, and non-state nationalism versus state-initiated developmental agenda. The sets of two seemingly opposite themes, as Nguyen-Thu shows here, are in fact mutually nested within each other.

The book is a compelling piece. If at all, though, the relative weakness of the book might lie in its methodology. While Nguyen-Thu systematically cites firsthand voices of people involved in the production of television programs, she draws much less rigorously on voices of consumers. Although the book’s meticulous examination of program contents makes a strong evidential base, one would naturally expect that the arguments about ordinary viewers’ reception of contents would have also been strengthened by interviews, commentaries, memoirs, or diaries.

Overall, this book provides colorful details and rich subtleties of how people in post-Reform Vietnam embraced their own lives and, in that process, underwent an important reordering of their nationalist sentiments, not through socialist heroism but through self-reflexive consumption of images and stories of ordinary and extraordinary lives of others. The personal is at the same time the national. For the reification of this imagined community, television played a pivotal role. This eye-opening book is recommended to anyone interested in understanding contemporary Vietnam, or post-authoritarian transitions in general.

Fujita Takanari 藤田高成

Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5936-3952>

Capitalism Magic Thailand: Modernity with Enchantment

PETER A. JACKSON

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Customers in malls shop for amulets that attract money like magnets. Monks pronounce incanta-

tions for businesspeople to win over customers. Spirit mediums become possessed to predict winning lottery numbers. Anyone familiar with Buddhist Thailand is aware of the intersections between religious practice and the accumulation of wealth. In *Capitalism Magic Thailand: Modernity with Enchantment*, Peter Jackson, a leading voice in the study of Thai Buddhism, sets out to examine these practices as well as the broader religious milieu in which they flourish.

Focusing on material culture and ritual, Jackson argues that linkages between wealth and religion were reinvigorated after the end of the Cold War by neoliberal policy, the increased marginality of economic models other than capitalism, and advancements in visual technologies and digital media. Downplaying the novelty yet emphasizing the greater visibility and proliferation of wealth-oriented religiosity in recent decades, he uses words such as “efflorescence” to evoke its liveliness. Jackson’s thesis rejects Max Weber’s prediction about the progressive “disenchantment” of modernizing societies, proposing instead that modernity itself generates ever more magic. The book ultimately aims to contribute to debates beyond Thai Buddhism, doubling as an exploration of “the conditions under which capitalist modernity produces novel forms of enchantment, not only in Southeast Asia but more generally across the globe” (p. 3).

To be sure, the phenomena studied by Jackson are not free from controversy, in Thailand and beyond. Critics describe practices linked to wealth accumulation as dangerous departures from a supposed original tradition, which, in their eyes at least, emphasizes liberation from material attachment. Jackson himself steers away from moral judgments. Expressing frustration with a scholarship that too often refuses to take prosperity religion in Thailand seriously, he urges readers to move “beyond an emphasis on the Thai cults of wealth as a commercialization of Buddhism [and] to instead view them from an alternative perspective as a spiritualization of the market” (p. 27). A subtle but crucial shift.

Capitalism Magic Thailand features seven chapters, some of which offer extensive reworkings of theoretical interventions articulated by the same author in previous publications. Chapter 1 argues that modernity produces two seemingly contrasting ways to engage with religion. One, in Jackson’s own words, “rationalizing” and “reformist,” invokes adherence to the sacred scriptures; the other, based on ritual, results in ever-new iterations of “magic” and “enchantment.” Chapter 2 focuses on yet another duality, as it proposes that Thai Buddhists manage their religious lives strategically by relegating practices deemed controversial to the private domain, while conforming to more orthodox forms of Buddhism in public.

Chapter 3 contemplates the diversity of beliefs and practices that exist within Thai religiosity, offering a series of analytical lenses, including, most usefully, the idea that different temporal and spatial contexts (in Thai, *kalathesa*) command different engagements with religion. Chapter 4 explores different religious practices and cults that are united by the common goal of material accumulation. Chapter 5 details how Thai Buddhists seek to secure the favor of prosperity-oriented deities via amulets and spirit possession. Chapter 6 interweaves the development of

prosperity religion with the history of modern Thailand, stressing linkages between major political or economic processes and the intensification of wealth-related practices among the elite and middle classes. Chapter 7 explores in detail the relationship between capitalist modernity and enchantment, also illustrating how media technology contributes to the “auraticization” of magical personas such as kings and monks.

From a methodological perspective, Jackson keeps his argument as comprehensive as possible by considering data gathered via meticulous engagements with secondary literature. He simultaneously maintains the focus on the nexus between religion and economy by “bracketing out,” as he explains in the Introduction, practices that, while also booming, are not strictly or ostensibly related to wealth. Nonprofessional mediums who reserve spirit possession for family members, infertile couples who pray for a pregnancy, and university students who flip tarot cards on campus to assess their chances at romance, while arguably on a continuum with the contexts he describes, therefore do not figure in his narrative. More generally, the author chooses to zoom out from the voices of individual religious actors in favor of a narrative in which social groups are moved by economic and political changes that unravel on a global and national scale.

The analytical categories emerging from this bird’s-eye perspective are neat. Too neat perhaps, at first glance. Working ethnographically, I can hardly think of Thai interlocutors who fit easily in the dual categories of reformist or magical Buddhism, the “rational” Buddhists I know also making claims that raise eyebrows, and those more inclined toward “magic” likewise presenting as vehicles of some kind of original truth. In the same way, I hesitate to identify specific social contexts that correspond to either the public or the private domain. These dualities, however, once understood as a theoretical model rather than a descriptive account, allow for an endless spectrum of possibilities, offering a useful framework to navigate the complexity found on the ground.

Worthy of praise for its scope and the illuminating theoretical advances, *Capitalism Magic Thailand* is an invaluable resource for anyone working on Buddhism and on the cultural dimensions of capitalist modernity in Southeast Asia. Jackson continues to be one of the most thought-provoking thinkers working on religiosity in the region and beyond.

Edoardo Siani

Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University of Venice