

Book Review: Karlsson, K. A. (2025). *A Sense of Place and Belonging: The Chiang Tung Borderland of Northern Southeast Asia*.

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Joseph Black^{a*} 

^aKing's College London, Chiang Mai University

*corresponding author: joseph.black@kcl.ac.uk

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Situated at the intersection of China, Laos, and Thailand, the Shan State has historically served as a cultural and commercial crossroads of civilizations, where trade, religion, and migration have woven an intricately textured fabric of identities. In contrast to Myanmar's predominantly Bamar heartland, the history of Shan State is inextricably linked to Tai cultural heritage and unique configurations of local autonomy. Among its many culturally diverse regions, the city of Chiang Tung (Keng Tung) exemplifies a dynamic borderland culture – shaped by fluid identities, cross-border exchanges, and a long history of local autonomy that defies easy categorization within national frameworks.

Klemens Karlsson's *A Sense of Place and Belonging* is a timely book about Chiang Tung that illuminates its cultural and historical significance beyond the conventional narratives of Southeast Asian nation-states. In *A Sense of Place and Belonging*, Karlsson explores how the region's indigenous people, particularly the Tai Khuen, construct sense and belonging through religious practice, sacred geography, and memory.

The book is thematic, with each chapter dealing with different aspects. In the introductory chapter, Karlsson lays out the historical and cultural context of Chiang Tung, framing it as a contested borderland marked by shifting sovereignties, diverse ethnic communities, and deep-rooted struggles for autonomy. He introduces the Tai Khuen as a distinct ethnic group within the broader Tai world and the region's complicated relationship with its neighbors, including Lan Na. The subsequent chapters look at local belonging, myths and memory, and the region's history. Karlsson also looks at the impact of colonial and foreign rule, as well as the significance of sacred spaces in local conceptions of place.

One of the most intriguing chapters is about the Songkran Festival in Chiang Tung. In this chapter, Karlsson weaves together many of the book's previous themes – ritual, memory, sacred space, and ethnic plurality. Songkran in Chiang

Tung is anything but a simple New Year celebration; it is a layered spectacle of often conflicting religious symbolism, ancestral memory, and land ownership. Karlsson shows how ritual drama rehearses a mythic history that binds the Tai Khuen and indigenous Tai Loi together in a symbolic contract rooted in premodern land rights. That contract is what Clifford Geertz (1980) calls a “theatre state”, in which ritual becomes the performance of sovereignty and belonging.

Particularly noteworthy is how Karlsson uses colonial sources – namely, the writings of J. George Scott, William Clifton Dodd, and C.M. Enriquez – to underscore the performative nature of earlier Songkran processions. Colonial voices highlight the “indecent” figures and “obscene” antics, which may suggest how ritual space allows for temporary inversion of social norms. In turn, we perceive how colonial agents othered other cultures and peoples, obtaining insights into past transnational spaces.

Beyond the rich historical and ethnographic insights, *A Sense of Place and Belonging* contributes to the field of ethnology by shedding light on a cultural landscape that has been understudied. Karlsson’s methodology, based on fieldwork and oral histories, gives an intimate view of how the Tai Khuen navigate their historical and spiritual world. This focus on lived experiences sets the book apart from broader regional histories that often ignore the agency of local communities in shaping their own narratives.

While the study offers several notable strengths, it also presents a few weaknesses that merit discussion. One of the book’s greatest strengths is how it frustrates methodological nationalism, a concept coined by Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2002) and largely tied to contemporary area and borderland studies. Western scholarship on Southeast Asia, such as David Wyatt’s (1984) *Thailand: A Short History* and Robert H. Taylor’s (2009) *The State in Myanmar* tends to focus on the Thai, Lao, Burmese, or Khmer state. Such a focus, inevitably, marginalizes the borderlands and open, interconnected societies that existed prior to the formation of the colonial state. Like Mandy Sadan’s (2013) *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderlands of Burma*, Karlsson’s study serves as a valuable antidote to this dominant trend. It sheds light on Chiang Tung’s unique cultural, religious, and historical individuality, which has very little in common with the rest of Myanmar and cannot be easily subsumed under contemporary Thai historiography.

Karlsson’s approach is commendable in that it contextualizes Chiang Tung through a local perspective rather than imposing Western academic frameworks onto its history and culture. This is particularly noticeable when Karlsson writes about sacred space and religion. The book explores how myth and memory construct the Tai Khuen people’s sense of origin and unity with the earth. In his examination of Chiang Tung’s Buddhist monasteries and literary tradition tied to Tai Khuen culture, Karlsson demonstrates how the region’s religious and intellectual life is deeply entwined with the broader Theravāda Buddhist world, particularly Lan Na and other parts of northern Thailand.

The author’s description of religious culture is especially illuminating, pointing to the ubiquity of both Buddhist monastic orders and spirit shrines in each village. This dual religious system, where animist practice coexists alongside Buddhism, presents a compelling example of Shan syncretic spirituality. Karlsson’s focus on how myth and ritual determine the sacred geography of Chiang Tung serves to inform readers about how these create local identity despite historical disruptions.

While Karlsson provides a rich ethnographic and historical account, there are some limitations. One limitation is the lack of critical discussion of gender. His treatment of religious culture and sacred space could have been stronger with an examination of who is included and excluded (e.g., women or queer folk) across these spaces, how gendering is articulated in the spiritual and social institutions of Chiang Tung, and what that could tell us about power relations in society.

Another limitation is the absence of discussion on innovative research methods that could be applied in a war-torn region, such as Myanmar. This would be highly valuable to individuals seeking to complete research on Myanmar or specifically the Shan State in the light of a general lack of discussion, which is also mirrored by the paucity of literature on this problem. Such missing debate is perhaps surprising given Karlsson's use of a qualitative, ethnographic approach, combined with historical analysis, which should allow space for discussion of unique methods. Karlsson could also have critically noted ethical concerns related to doing research in a country where trauma and displacement are persistent issues. From my experience, this is a major blind spot in many researchers' experiences, and Myanmar offers the best opportunity to discuss this.

In conclusion, Karlsson's study successfully projects a historically overlooked community, offering a compelling account of Chiang Tung's unique place in the history of northern Southeast Asia. Although certain aspects could benefit from further development, the book is an excellent read for anyone looking into borderland societies, religious syncretism, and the historical forces which have constructed one of Southeast Asia's most intriguing but least appreciated regions.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Black is a graduate student in the War Studies Department at King's College London and the Women's Studies Center at Chiang Mai University. He is also a research officer at the University of New South Wales.

► Contact: joseph.black@kcl.ac.uk