Book Review: Hongsaton, P., & Chan, Y.-K. (Eds.). (2025). New Directions in Thai Studies.

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Edited by Preedee Hongsaton and Ying-kit Chan, *New Directions in Thai Studies* is an impressive work that aims to build and expand upon previous conceptualizations of Thai studies, diving deeper into ideas such as Thailand's borders and sovereignty. The introduction contextualizes Thai studies as "'kop nai kala khrop' (a frog in a half coconut shell)" (p. 1). This Thai and Indonesian metaphor can refer to both narrow-minded people and ideas. Based on the idea that the frog is sheltered by living in the shell, the authors conceptualize ignorance as resulting from a lack of exposure to other ideas. In presenting this metaphor, the authors denote how sheltered and one-dimensional views within Thai studies have taken center stage, particularly within history. The reader is promised a new perception of Thai studies, one that is not single-faceted, and advocates for a shift away from Western perspectives and positions to give agency to Thai scholars' opinions. Broadly speaking, this ambitious piece of work achieves its goal of advancing Thai studies – it presents new conceptualizations and approaches to studies of Thailand, drawing on the work of many distinguished Thai scholars. However, despite advancing understandings of Thai studies, some evident limitations exist, which will be discussed later in this review.

The book is structured into three sections: New Histories, New Disciplines, and New Comparisons. New Histories seeks to reexamine existing historical arguments and accounts, focusing on Thai nationalism, national defense during King Chulalongkorn's reign, forestry administration, and Thai queer history. New Disciplines has three main foci: new and underrecognized religions in Thailand, cultural policy as a means to expand Thailand's influence during WWII, and an introduction to sensory approaches to Thai culture. Finally, New Comparisons examines hygiene reform in Thailand and its relation to European standards, Thailand's and Japan's centralization and economic development, George Orwell's works within the Thai political landscape, and lastly, an exploration of how Thai historiographies represent Indochina throughout the Cold War. Whilst each chapter focuses on a different aspect of Thai studies, their placement under the three sections sufficiently substantiates their importance for inclusion in the book, providing a logical cohesion of ideas.

Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 are all significant in furthering the reader's understanding of territory in Thai history. Notable mention should be given to Chapter 2, written by Tanapong Luekajornchai. Tanapong provides a solid background on preexisting scholarly debates on Siam's territorial losses/gains in the 19th and 20th centuries, post-colonialism, and concepts such as

royal nationalism. He cautions that one approach or conceptualization of Thai history should not be universally accepted, but rather that all critical works should be thoroughly examined, positioning his contribution to Thai studies through researching the relationship between "historical scholarship and political realities" (p. 51). In doing so, he advocates for a more critical and comprehensive understanding of Thai history.

Chapter 3, written by Thep Boontanondha, explores the various factors and challenges in the development of national defense during King Chulalongkorn's reign, exploring relations and anxieties caused by external powers such as France. In Chapter 4, Tinakrit Sireerat explores how foreign influence in the Thai government was intertwined with legislation passed on forestry and land usage, demonstrating the importance of simple paperwork as an important element of history. Written by Emi Donald, Chapter 5 highlights the importance of a queer history exhibit at Museum Siam in Bangkok and how it serves as an exemplification of and an attempt to put the pieces of Thai queer history together. These chapters offer excellent background information, providing much context that exists beyond Anglophone literature, meaning they serve as a useful resource not only to newcomers to Thai studies, but also to scholars who may not be able to understand Thai. These chapters also successfully position themselves as new histories, either by critiquing previous scholarly discussions of historical issues in the case of Chapter 2, or by providing a new focus to understudied aspects, in the case of Chapters 3, Four and Five.

One limitation arises in Chapter 6 in New Disciplines, written by Yu-sheng Lin. The chapter seeks to redefine the realm of religion in Thailand through the discussion and inclusion of "life coaches" as a modern interpretation of religion. She argues that the "Western" definition of "religion" or a "postcolonial" view of research is the cause for new religious movements to be "seldom touched upon" (p. 156). Whilst contemporary scholars have begun to explore diverse religious and spiritual practices in Thailand (e.g., Jackson, 2022; McDaniel, 2011; Taylor, 2024), the claim that Western notions of religion are responsible for the lack of investigation into contemporary religious movements is empirically unsubstantiated by this particular chapter. From a top-down dictionary approach, we can see definitions of religion between Thai and English appear similar (see Office of the Royal Society, 2011; Merriam-Webster, 2026); however, this alone may be insufficient evidence in dispelling such claims. We must also consider the personal aspect of religion. For example, the author's argument draws on a comparison to Scientology, which has also been questioned as a cult (see Shermer, 2011). In this sense, we can see that the different ways people perceive religion do not necessarily depend on any authority, but rather on how they personally understand and approach it. Therefore, because different people perceive religion differently, declaring life coaches as religious movements and blaming Western ways of thinking for the missing respective literature lacks sufficient evidence from relevant studies. Rather, further research should extensively analyze how Thai people actually perceive these movements to gain a more concrete understanding of the issue. Without this understanding, the author risks promoting an essentialist view of Thai culture by speaking on behalf of Thai people without consulting them. Instead, they could have exclusively highlighted the role of life coaches in contemporary Thai society, which would have strengthened the contribution of the chapter.

A particularly important contribution of the book can be found in Chapter 8, written by Arthit Jiamrattanyoo. The chapter provides a unique approach to reconceptualizing how researchers can approach studying Thailand: through sensory studies. He examines how various social, cultural, and political aspects of Thailand can be contextualized through senses, with examples including taste, smell, and sound. He specifically utilizes examples such as politics and

culture, but also highlights how the role of sense in capitalism is understudied. Whilst limited work on sense has been done in Thailand, some examples of recent sensory studies in a Thai context include studies of Thai massage and sound within protests (e.g., Iida, 2013; Tausig, 2019). As a relatively new research area within Thai studies, Jiamrattanyoo advocates for an approach that calls for conceptualizations of how sense is constructed in Thailand as well as how sense has been shaped by external notions of sense. Whilst he characterizes this additional conceptualization as Western perspectives, this should be expanded to all forms of external influence on sense. For example, sense could be conceptualized through examinations of contemporary political conflicts such as the recent Thai-Cambodian border conflict, which incorporates many visual aspects of sense (e.g., on social media). By examining how either side has influenced public perception through sense, a greater understanding of how Thais perceive and interact with the conflict could be achieved. Whilst the concept of 'Thai sense' is an important step to promoting sensory studies in Thailand, it is essentialist, as sense may differ greatly depending on region or social group. Expanding Thai sensory studies to a wider variety of contexts (e.g., examining not only history, but how it differs and influences contemporary sense) or social groups (e.g., regional groups of people, youth) would strengthen the contribution of this chapter. However, overall, the chapter proposes a whole new sub-area of Thai studies that not only challenges preexisting notions of sense but also inspires the exploration of sense in Thailand through a multitude of different angles.

Finally, Chapter 11, written by Sutida Wimuttikosol, is particularly notable in its explanation of the significance of George Orwell's works in a Thai political context. It demonstrates the intersection of literature and politics and how this was used and utilized by both political activists and the Thai government as a vehicle to disseminate political thought. It compares and contrasts how George Orwell's works *1984* and *Animal Farm* are understood in foreign contexts, and gives a comprehensive background of their introduction and relevance in Thailand.

An overall strength of the book is the diversity of fields of study represented by the authors, and also how they challenge preexisting notions and frameworks well established within Thai studies. Readers who are experts in Thai studies or who merely have a basic interest in the country can not only benefit from the important contextual background the book provides, but also from its critique of previous works within Thai studies. This is particularly exemplified by Chapter 2, which provides a comprehensive background of Thai sovereignty and debates around it. This chapter also pushes readers to consider that all critical works of Thai history should be (re)examined to gain the best and most correct understandings of Thailand possible. Chapter 4's focus on paper trails and forestry policy in Thai history also demonstrates how new angles of Thai history can reveal how policies were shaped by both foreign and Thai perspectives. Additionally, Chapter 8's focus on sense serves as a new methodological direction within Thai studies, and Chapter 11 discusses the neglected importance of how metaphors drawn from literature are significant in the Thai political landscape. However, no chapter focuses on language, which is a very significant part of Thai studies and area studies in general. Both politically and culturally relevant, language is an important tool in furthering understandings of Thailand.

Furthermore, one of the key impressions of *New Directions in Thai Studies* is that it promises to de-Westernize or dispel Western notions from understandings of Thailand, moving away from Western education systems. For example, the introduction alludes to the Thai university system being a vehicle for the dissemination of Western ways of thinking. This premise in itself is problematic; East/West divides have been criticized as incompatible in a global age (Kawada, 2003), and even inaccurate in the case of individualism/collectivism (Van de Vliert et al., 2025).

Repeated mentions of Pax-America also seem to equate 'Western' with 'American', and although the hegemony of American narratives is acknowledged, it excludes possibilities of more diverse viewpoints. Likewise, the essentialism of a Thai perspective can be called into question. Historical examples include how previous notions of Thainess involved resisting foreign influence (p. 17; see also Winichakul, 1994), and how Thai students who protested during the 1970s were portrayed as communists, or non-Thai (see Haberkorn, 2015). Consequently, essentializing one approach or conceptualization of a viewpoint promotes an "us vs. them" dichotomy of stereotypes, which may oversimplify and weaken research in Thai Studies. Ryan and Louie (2007) make similar critiques, problematizing a Confucian/Western dichotomy in education.

In examining this problematic promise of the book, key examples of attempts/critiques to dismantle 'Western' viewpoints include the concept of 'queer' in Chapter 5, which is described as incompatible with the LGBT+ community in Thailand. Likewise, Chapter 6 criticizes the Western hegemony of religious narratives as the consequence of understudied concepts such as life coaches. 'Queer' and 'religion' are arguably inherently personal terms which vary within individuals, within communities, and across countries, meaning that to say what is 'Western' overshoots the critiques of these concepts. Chapter 8, whilst recognizing the importance of understanding how Western sense has influenced or differs from Thai sense, is limited by such broad labels in how sensory studies could be approached. Conversely, other chapters use 'Western' to explore more concrete terms such as colonial power or political influence, notably Chapters 4, 7 and 10, which examine the historical nature of power struggles between Thailand and external forces. Rather than trying to 'de-westernize' Thai studies, these chapters examine how different Western influences have shaped Thailand. Even Chapter 9, which directly discusses hygiene between Western nations and Thailand, largely uses specific examples of hygiene reform. This renders the label of 'Western' less problematic because it uses specific examples from historical contexts to compare hygiene between Europe and Thailand. Overall, this promise to de-Westernize, or even de-Americanize Thai studies, appears inconsistent throughout the text. On one hand, certain chapters make bold attacks towards so-called 'Western' concepts, whereas others merely seek to deconstruct hegemonic powers in Thai history. As the introduction suggests, "this generation is in a better position to critique Thai nationalism and its antipathy to democracy" (p. 23). If this is the case, then why is a polarizing binary of Western/Asian or Thai/Western necessary, when all forms of bias and hegemony can be explored? By encouraging Thai studies scholars to exclusively approach research in context, we can understand how other factors such as age, religion, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality influence the way in which we conduct research, and how the research itself is affected by this diversity. Such an approach may inspire research into more specific, situational contexts, and may be indicative of a true new direction.

New Directions in Thai Studies has advanced both approaches to Thai studies and understandings of historical events in a new light. It serves as a valuable resource for new scholars or students who seek to expand into Thai studies. However, whilst its message of Western hegemony in Thai studies may be an important warning for future scholars and their research, it promotes a potentially harmful dichotomy which could limit how we approach Thai studies. Future work should aim to dispel bias in general by recognizing any form of it. In doing so, a more inclusive and conscientious approach to Thai studies can be promoted, empowering all scholars passionate about this diverse and complex country.



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DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.