

Protecting Siam's Heritage*. Chris Baker, ed. Chiang Mai: The Siam Society and Silkworm Books, 2013. 360 pp.

Reviewed by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin

The volume is, as the title suggests, an appraisal of Thailand's heritage protection. This collection of articles first appeared as a special volume on the occasion of the 100th volume of the *Journal of the Siam Society* in 2012. As Chris Baker, the Honorary Editor of the Journal, writes in the preface, the Siam Society was launching a project on Siamese Heritage Protection at that time. The Council of the Siam Society organized a series of six bi-monthly panel discussions (held in the Thai language) in 2012. James Stent, as the head of the Siamese Heritage Trust (a permanent section of the Siam Society), points out in the introduction, this program was set up to "give the Society a public advocacy role in spurring greater public awareness and action concerning heritage protection issues" (1). Consequently, this topic became the focus of the journal's special volume. Silkworm Books agreed to have this volume also published as a book in order to make its contents accessible to a wider audience.

The 20 authors united in this lavishly illustrated volume have different backgrounds, academic (from various disciplines) as well as non-academic, but all of them are well-known and committed experts (among them, officials and activists) on particular issues of heritage and heritage protection in Thailand. Most of the predominantly Thai authors are advocates of what they call Siam's heritage (probably to highlight the long cultural history and its [im]material traces that go beyond today's nation state). Their articles address concerns mainly with regard to political and administrative perspectives and decisions of what these authorities consider to be heritage worth preserving—or being demolished to make way for modernization projects. Many of the chapters are critical of the developments that have been taking place over the past years and decades. The goal of these authors (and the whole book in general) is to achieve a change in the current official heritage policies and actions and a more participatory, democratic direction by also paying due recognition to cultural diversity.

Stent lists 10 "obstacles standing in the way of an effective heritage protection in Thailand" (5) and many of the subsequent contributions exemplify several of them: inadequacy of legal framework; deficiencies of governance, failure to recognize intangible and vernacular culture; official narratives (which reinforce the established description of national identity or even nationalism); suppression of diversity; lack of community consultation and participation; professional deficiencies in heritage conservation; quest for tourist revenues leading to inferior heritage conservation; poor condition of Thailand's state museums; and power of development interests. However, many of these "obstacles" can be identified in many countries and it would be worthwhile examining them from a comparative perspective. Instead of referring to China and Korea—to contrast the heritage development in these countries with Thailand—it would have been more rewarding to have a look at neighboring Southeast Asian states, such as Cambodia, Vietnam, or Laos. However, this would be an academic endeavor rather than an advocacy enterprise.

The book is divided in three sections. The first, "History," comprises a number of chapters dealing with the history of heritage conservation in Thailand. The second, "Issues," engages

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in topics such as the—rather tense—relationship between tourism and heritage, the actual political and bureaucratic understanding of “heritage” (as spelled out in the so-called Rattanakosin Charter), the organization, and the (mis)management and ideological orientation of heritage conservation also in relation to modernist urban and rural planning. The third section, “International Perspectives,” opens up a broader perspective than focusing on Siam’s heritage in a rather strict sense by highlighting some encompassing heritage issues in Asia.

Overall, the book gives a vividly written and committed glimpse into the current stage of heritage discourses and conservation practices in Thailand and suggests some substantial changes.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.14434/mar.v9i1-2.19892>