Andrew Alan Johnson

*Ghosts of the New City. Spirits, Urbanity, and the Ruins of Progress in Chiang Mai.*
Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2014, xii + 196. [Southeast Asia: Politics, Meaning, and Memory Series] ISBN 9780824839710, price: USD 55.00 (hardback); 9780824839710, 27.00 (paperback).

Chiang Mai, the center of the Lanna region, has been an ethnographic hotspot for anthropologists of the people and cultures of Northern Thailand. The political and historical transformations of the relationship between the former vassal state and the modern Thai state have provided much material for ethnographic analysis. Andrew Johnson’s *Ghosts of the New City* is a study of Chiang Mai city that focuses on the ideas of space, power, and progress. He questions the ‘Lanna renaissance’ in the face of the contemporary neoliberal economic moment, in which he finds a Chiang Mai city full of the stories of ruined constructions and haunting ghosts in the urbanized landscape after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. The central argument of the book lies in the internal reification of haunting and the uncanny in inhabitants’ quotidian places such as their homes and the city.

Johnson begins the book by investigating Chiang Mai inhabitants’ discourses on high-rise structures and gated communities. He argues that the urbanites consider the architecture to be haunted because stories of ghosts and of migrants hiding in these places, as well as in deserted and ruinous buildings, throw doubt on the promise of progressiveness and prosperity (Chapter One). Then, the author turns to outline the foundations of Chiang Mai’s power and sacrality which he claims rely on the city’s prosperous history of Lanna culture and modern architectural developments and constructions (Chapter Two). He shows that Lanna power incorporates supernatural ideas of power into a notion of urbanity (p. 34). The Lanna city-state is viewed as a center and fountain of Buddhist charisma through rituals and myths. The city is the source of power and charisma cascading down the social hierarchy of Lanna (Chapter Three). Johnson then illustrates the way in which the source of this power and charisma is inevitably blended with the uncanny in order to assure the achievement of material progress.

The central issue in Johnson’s book emerges in the three core chapters (Three, Four, and Five) in his analysis of the understanding of the discourse of progressiveness (*khwam charoen*) in Chiang Mai city. He places the idiom at the intersection of the domains of spirit mediumship and architectural urban space. *Khwam charoen* calls for the attention to the invocation of Lanna’s pastness of prosperity and demonstrates the currently problematic material constructions of landscape. Both spirit mediums and city planners are crucial conduits that project the construction of Chiang Mai’s progressiveness. Charis-
matic power (*barami*) has been drawn from the prosperous past to the present by spirit mediums and city planners alike. While the mediums link Lanna to charismatic power, the planners link it to cultural heritage as a foundation for urban development. Both groups are advocates of a *charoen* which is seen to ‘involve the resurrection of the lost glory of Lanna to correct the ruinous present time of bad ghosts and empty buildings’ (p. 72).

I enjoyed reading the author’s ethnographically thick description of his interlocutors’ life stories. Spirit mediums in anthropological writing across different societies share similar life difficulties—familial conflicts, financial hardship, mental and physical illness—as the genesis of becoming mediums and in their subsequent lives. In an advance on this anthropological genre, Johnson interweaves Lanna historical accounts as well as discussions of current Chiang Mai socio-economic forces under the Thai political regime into his artful analysis. The author applies the idea of internal Orientalism to suggest the way Bangkok sees the Northern region as subordinate, female, and tribal but at the same time possibly united with the central Thai regime with full of progressive potential (pp. 104–105). This view, I think, is different from the perspective through which Bangkok sees the Northeast region, or Isan. With its less developed image and lack of cultural capital compared to Lanna which contributes to the state’s tourism and monetization, Isan has been viewed in a frame of internal colonization that requires state control and manipulation politically and socially. This instructive contrast can help us to understand the relationships between the Thai state and its regions.

As a native Thai speaker, I only have two suggestions that might technically improve the book. First, I found that some English-Thai translated and transliterated words are not correctly spelled out. This small error often occurs in other books on Thai ethnography when non-Thai authors refer to Thai terms. This translation might be risky and has a significant influence on the way the authors understand and interpret the discursive practice hermeneutically. For instance, Johnson misses the Thai title of the film *Laddaland* (2010), putting too much emphasis in his framing analysis of that film on the English version *The Golden Land*. The Thai title refers to a land of creeper, offering a much more subtle perspective on the role and image of the mythic past in contemporary Chiang Mai. Such a distortion of a potentially nuanced moment in the book highlights the missed opportunities of small details in Johnson’s rich ethnographic material. When Johnson applies such minute details with accuracy, as in his subtle analysis of the Thai terms progress (*charoen*) and haunting (*lok-lon*), the book is at its most successful. Second, I found a reference in the book is missing. This causes a slight difficulty for the reader to search for more interesting sources.