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Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, *The Fate of Rural Hell: Asceticism and Desire in Buddhist Thailand*

Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2012. Pp. viii, 99; photographs.

Reviewed by Erick White.

This slender volume, full of many provocative assertions and interpretations, actually constitutes something more like an extended essay than a full-fledged monograph. Its fifty-six pages of thought-provoking text are supplemented by thirty-eight eye-catching photographs which document a cross-section of the statuary that populates the book’s central focus – the “Hell Garden” of Wat Phai Rong Wua, a temple located in a hard to access rural corner of Suphanburi province. These dramatic, grotesque and eroticized three-dimensional representations of the classic Thai Buddhist vision of hell, designed to educate and warn the general public about the future costs of current moral transgressions, serve as a primary empirical foundation for Benedict Anderson’s more general musings about history, religiosity, aesthetics, desire and subjectivity in rural Thailand, past and present. The seed for these extended reflections was planted more than thirty-five years ago in 1975, when Anderson first visited the Suphanburi temple. Since then he has returned on three occasions, each time collecting additional information about the temple and its phantasmagoric visual spectacle. He has also consulted two Thai master’s theses on the temple. Anderson’s continuing fascination with the temple’s arresting visual

extravagance eventually grew into this exercise in “investigating this rural hell within its local and wider contexts” (p. 11).

The Fate of Rural Hell is concerned primarily with three issues: the history and context of the temple and its hell garden, the psychic and motivational undercurrents at play in the creation of the hell garden, and the implications of the hell garden’s seemingly inevitable eclipse as a pedagogical project of piety. In exploring the history and context of the temple and its hell garden, Anderson initially reflects on the statuary itself, and on its anarchic, even sadistic, glorification of the sufferings of impalement, mutilation and torture that await the morally disreputable in their future hellish rebirths. Anderson is especially interested in the explanatory captions painted directly on the statues, cataloguing and categorizing them according to the types of transgressions described, who committed them and against whom they were committed. He notes that the sins depicted are conventional and even generically stereotypic within the Buddhist ethical imaginaire – murder, lying, stealing, adultery, slander, etc. – rather than particularly Thai or contemporary. There are no corrupt politicians, committers of *lèse majesté*, communists, professional hit men, or selfish capitalists represented in the Hell Garden, for instance. He is also fascinated by the nakedness of the sufferers and the eroticized masculinity of the servants of Yama, the mythological judge of the recently deceased, who are torturing them.

Anderson also reflects on the intertwined history of the temple and the biography of the temple’s late abbot, Luang Phor Khom, both as contextualized within Thailand’s twentieth-century political and religious history. He focuses especially on the history of building projects pursued by the abbot, of which the Hell Garden is just one example. What emerges is a developmental tale of growth, expansion and subsequent decline within an expanding, internationalizing capitalist economy. In the

twenty years prior to 1957, Luang Phor Khom established the architectural foundations of a generic rural temple at Wat Phai Rong Wua by building several sermon halls and sleeping quarters, as well as an *ubosot* (ordination hall), a school house, and a connecting road. But, spurred on by the national and international celebrations of the 2500-year anniversary of the Buddha in 1957, the abbot began to pursue more monumental if conventional devotional building projects, such as a giant seated Buddha and replicas of Indian Buddhist religious sites. These resulted, in turn, in increasing recognition from Bangkok elites and even from the Thai king himself in 1969. This recognition subsequently fueled an expansion in visitors and donations in the early 1970s. This attention and support led to a rapid, but relatively brief, burst of more topically eclectic projects – the Hell Garden included – which were then followed by a winding down of construction over the subsequent fifteen years. By the time of the abbot's death in 1990, an air of desolation and decay had set in, and the temple carried the burden of enormous, hidden, and mounting debts.

Having examined the historical and social context within which the Hell Garden is embedded, Anderson explores the otherwise unspoken motivational undercurrents at play in the creation and uses of the Hell Garden's extended visual diorama. Two psychological dimensions are of particular interest to Anderson – the motivations of the abbot and the psychic price of the patronage developed between the abbot and his craftsmen. From Anderson's perspective, the Hell Garden of Wat Phai Rong Wua is a historically innovative form of visual representation for its time, leaving behind the more muted, conventional interactive medium of murals that preceded it. In particular, Anderson is intrigued by the “anarchic, semi-sadistic eroticism” (p. 60) that he sees as animating the statuary, whose aesthetics was consciously and explicitly specified in the abbot's detailed instructions to his craftsmen. Ultimately, Anderson

argues that the logic underlying the Hell Garden's dramatic aesthetic vision lies in the abbot's repressed and sublimated sexual desire and its fantasized phantasmagoric objectification *via* a "theology of abjection" (p. 90). He even goes so far as to refer to the abbot as "gay" and describes him as "a religious figure struggling in unusual ways to deal with his unorthodox sexuality on the eve of the triumph of a consumerist culture" (p. 93). At the same time, Anderson highlights the erotics of devotional intercession and pleasurable transgressions which are also sometimes at play in the Hell Garden. Individuals seeking improved health at two statues deemed by locals to be endowed with magical power are known to touch their clothed genitals in pursuit of blessing, and some have even danced naked before the statues in petition. Similarly, local boys have been known secretly to masturbate at night before the naked female statues. The Hell Garden, then, is apparently a magnet for provoking and channeling subversive, unspoken, furtive eroticism.

Just as intriguing for Anderson are the complicated social relations between the abbot and the folk artisans who actually built the statuary of the Hell Garden. The craftsmen, Anderson concludes, worked as unpaid or minimally paid modern versions of what an earlier era called "temple slaves". Under the umbrella of the abbot's patronage, they were easily exploited, as well as easily disposed of when the building projects wound down. Nonetheless, Anderson identifies an enduring, collusive social indebtedness within the intimate bonds of mutual dependency fashioned under rural patronage. The last surviving sculptor, Suchart, harbors resentment at being trapped in a dead-end and impoverishing occupation and yet acknowledges that, out of deference to Luang Phor Khom, he chose not to carve statues of the hellish fate of corrupt local officials, dishonest monks and crooked temple committee members. In turn, despite Suchart's fall into alcoholism and drug addiction, the abbot cared for him. After the abbot's death, his nephew and successor also

rescued Suchart from abject poverty by allowing him to ordain despite his un-exemplary behavior. Anderson highlights the intimacy and hierarchy of this social dynamic, the celebration and abjection underlying rural patron-client relations as they play out in complicated ways across an environment of mutually unspoken, frustrated and rejected desire. “It is not hard to conclude that Suchart, who is no one’s fool, understood what drove Luang Phor Khom, maybe even sympathized with it, but he needed the abbot’s authority and patronage. Conversely, his patron was grateful for this tact and for his spectacular statuary and so kept him under his wing” (p. 86).

Anderson concludes his analysis of the Hell Garden at Wat Phai Rong Wua by reflecting briefly on the declining cultural and social salience of the religious aesthetics, pious instruction and devotional inspiration as exemplified within and through the temple’s built environment. The genitalia of some statues are found to have been covered up during Anderson’s most recent visit, while other statues have disappeared, presumably in response to public rebuke. (Even before his death the abbot displayed an ambivalent defiance and shame in the face of public criticisms of the Hell Garden as “pornography”.) The visual message of the park seems out-of-date and rather sedate in the eyes of a contemporary urban youth more familiar with a heady diet of horror films, violent video games and Internet pornography. Physically deteriorating and spatially marginal, the Hell Garden comes across as increasingly irrelevant and backwards in relation to other tourist venues, even as its sacral aura fades. Its particular fusion of kitsch, languor and piety, Anderson suggests, marks it more as an historical museum, as a cultural world out of joint with the wider cultural and aesthetic sensibilities at play in Thailand’s dominant digitized, high-speed mass culture. In short, the models of eroticism and faith at work in the Hell Garden have been left behind to a considerable degree by the robust

urban bourgeois consumerist culture increasingly prominent across contemporary Thai society and public life.

Anderson's case study is suggestive and challenging in many ways. He notes many themes, features and dynamics at play at Wat Phai Rong Wua that other scholars have observed, if not always examined in detail, in other studies of Thai popular religiosity, both urban and rural. The murky and fragile finances of temple development and expansion, and their dependence upon a mercurial history of charisma and promotional success. The proclivity for creating a visual landscape of dramatic replicas – of holy sites, of other worlds both hellish and divine, of important figures at important times. The emphasis upon monumentality and grandiosity in religious construction, and the desire to create religious objects of such prominence that they will bring fame to Buddhism, nation and creator, if not always in that order. The spontaneous and incremental sacralization of religious objects that results when local people circulate tales of miraculous interventions and good fortune. The parallel if sometimes dueling logics of pilgrimage and tourism, piety and commercialism. The creeping influence of a retrospective bourgeois morality in the interpretation of received religious tradition and practice. The omnipresent and easily deployable rhetoric of moral decline and collapsing monastic virtue when seeking to explain the waning fortunes of any temple, group or figure.

Alongside such tropes, however, Anderson addresses issues and themes much less typically explored in scholarly studies of Thai Buddhist religiosity, even if they frequently animate critical commentary among the Thai public. Social ambition and institutional frustration. Sexual desire and economic exploitation. Social marginalization and semi-feudal hierarchy.

Anderson's exploration of eroticism in Thai Buddhist belief, practice and experience is particularly valuable. The Thai religious landscape is filled with evidence of the often oblique and sublimated erotics of devotional practice, and yet scholars have politely declined to study it. No doubt this is because a normative celibate monastic ethos has so thoroughly defined the official, public interpretation of Thai Buddhist belief and practice, even for non-monastics. Yet most Thai Buddhists are not celibate, and among monastics only saints have, in theory, fully transcended sexuality and eroticism. Consequently, an examination of how sexuality and eroticism both shape and are given expression in and through religious roles, practices, and material culture is a useful, even necessary, analytic project.

The pragmatic difficulty of such studies, however, is exemplified by Anderson's arguments in *The Fate of Rural Hell*. The empirical evidence of Luang Phor Khom's "unorthodox sexuality" is partial, ambiguous and thin, at best, and the argument that the aesthetics of the Hell Garden is grounded in the abbot's "rejected desire" and "theology of abjection" seems speculative. Anderson's analysis does not, after all, draw on any actual interview on these topics with the abbot who died so long ago. And even if one could have interviewed Luang Phor Khom, the normative prohibitions on discussing such matters would make illuminating the erotic psychic life of any monastic, and especially of an ambitious and well-regarded abbot, very difficult. One would very likely be left with, at best, ambiguous, fragmented speculation after reading between the lines and interpreting tea leaves. More amenable to study, however, would be the intimate dependencies of patronage within religious settings, and their ability subtly and even profoundly to shape and inform Buddhist practice and experience. Buddhist ideologies valorize and Buddhist institutions compel the production of religious forms of dependent patronage, most notably within lineages of teachers and disciples. It is

thus remarkable that more scholars have not explored the social significance, cultural consequences and phenomenological reality of such ideologies and institutions in the cultivation of Buddhist piety and perfection.

Anderson's exploration of the aesthetics of vernacular religious art and of the role of such aesthetics in both reflecting and creating religious experience, meaning and value is also noteworthy and valuable. Few studies of Thai Buddhism have examined such themes, and those that have, such as Sandra Cate's *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai Temple in Wimbledon*, have typically focused on elite or official forms of religious aesthetics and their production, rather than on vernacular and folk art and aesthetics.¹ Vernacular, folk and commercial aesthetics, however, obviously constitutes a large, perhaps even dominant, percentage of the total universe of Thai religious art in circulation. Anderson's examination of the vernacular aesthetics of Wat Phai Rong Wua's Hell Garden, however, is admittedly truncated. He is almost exclusively focused on its relation to the motivations and sensibilities of its creators. While he pays some attention to the documented perceptions and uses of this folk art on the part of local people, he leaves mostly unaddressed the question of reception. He presumably chose not to interview visitors to the Hell Garden about their reasons for visiting, their practices while visiting, or their opinions about the meaning of the religious aesthetics at play in its recreation of hellish torment. One unfortunate consequence of this imbalance is that the reader is left unsure to what degree Anderson's aesthetic judgments and interpretations are shared by the general Thai

¹ Sandra Cate, *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai Temple in Wimbledon* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003). Justin McDaniel has recently called for a study of vernacular art that emphasizes its plural ritual contexts and contested social uses and reception. He briefly discusses hell gardens, though without specific attention to their aesthetics. See Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), chapter 4 and page 122, respectively.

public. How widely held is the perception that the Hell Garden's imagery is sadistic, erotic and anarchic, and within what segments of the public? Are Thais similarly struck by the nakedness of the imagery and the fact that genitalia and breasts are generally free of disfigurement? How innovative or conventional are the aesthetic choices made at this temple from the perspective of Thai visitors?

An equally intriguing topic implicitly raised by Anderson's case study is the question of the cross-fertilization of religious aesthetics within Thai society and culture. Anderson emphasizes the personality of Luang Phor Khom in shaping the aesthetic vision of Wat Phai Rong Wua's Hell Garden even as he recognizes that such earlier aesthetic models as murals and scripture also played a role. Interestingly however, the sculptor Suchart points to the importance of comics and films – Western and Indian – in providing artistic models for imitation and elaboration in his work. Reflections on aesthetic borrowing often conceptualize it as transmission and transformation between elites and masses, the center and the periphery, the palace and peasants, or distinct national and regional communities. However, the rise in the twentieth century of mass culture industries complicates such notions. Movies, television, magazines, books, comics, and commercial art, as well as radio and records, provided an expanding and increasingly diverse spectrum of aesthetic mediums, forms and repertoires within Thai society for the representation and rethinking of Buddhist piety and faith. Yet very little scholarly work has attended to questions of how new representational venues, modalities and possibilities facilitated the reproduction and the transformation of Buddhist aesthetics and sensibilities among distinct segments of the Thai public. Nor has much attention been paid to the presumably complicated trajectories of influence that developed as new

aesthetic forms and sensibilities, buttressed by the prestige of being new and “modern”, circulated among Thai religious artisans.²

In speculating on the fate of Wat Phai Rong Wua’s rural hell, I would argue that there are in fact at least three somewhat distinct fates at play in Anderson’s study – the fate of rural hell gardens, the fate of religious folk art, and the fate of non-bourgeois religious aesthetics. Each deserves more sustained scholarly attention.

There are dozens of large, free-standing hell gardens in Thailand, and many more truncated versions embedded in the corners of other temples. They are a relatively common and widely recognized aesthetic trope within the architectural vocabulary of Thai temples. Nonetheless, they have never been systematically studied, and so we cannot answer many basic historical and contextual questions about them. When did they first emerge? How many are there, where are they and when were they built? What motivated the decision to build them and what aesthetic and architectural precursors provided templates for imitation? How similar are the imagery, spatial layouts and explicit moral instruction across the various hell gardens? Who are the visitors to these gardens, why do they visit them, how often do they visit them and what do they do when visiting them? Does the public’s reception of the hell gardens’

² The only work of which the author is aware to examine these questions is Tiffany Hacker, “Of Tattooed Men and Muscular Gods: Transformations in Thai Mural Painting”, master’s thesis, National University of Singapore, 2008. Interestingly, Hacker documents how the famous serialized commercial illustrations of classic Buddhist stories by So. Thammaphakdi & Sons from the 1950s and 1960s, representing an innovative style of Western-influenced Buddhist imagery, came to influence the aesthetics of later mural painters across Thailand. These illustrations also created a standardized visual vocabulary for representing central Buddhist narratives, one that has been reproduced across the Thai national landscape. This influence has been criticized by the Fine Arts Department, however. The influence of the commercial art of So. Thammaphakdi & Sons extends beyond the borders of Thailand. The author has seen adapted versions of the So. Thammaphakdi & Sons series depicting Buddhist hells and heaven *via* the story of Phra Malai painted as mural scenes on the walls of temples in Laos, for example.

pedagogical and aesthetic message conform to the desired intentions of their creators? Only after gathering such data could we safely speculate about the future social fate of hell gardens, let alone answer such basic questions as whether fewer of them are being built and fewer individuals visiting them. And if their social presence is declining, does this indicate the eclipse of a particular aesthetic and pedagogical choice within the Thai Buddhist instructional vocabulary, or rather its displacement into and transformation within other mediums, such as the instructional video tours of hell realms and karmic fate offered up by religious movements such as Wat Phra Dhammakaya?

The Hell Garden of Wat Phai Rong Wua exemplifies the political economy of folk art production from an earlier historical era – amateur and self-trained artisans, improvisational and idiosyncratic designs fusing imitation and innovation, and reliance upon incompletely monetized, non-contractual labor. All of this has progressively changed, however, as artisans have increasingly become professionalized and the material culture of Buddhism has become a mass market of serial commodity forms distinguished, at times, primarily through unique branding. Not so infrequently nowadays, the monumental and prestigious architectural projects of prominent temples and groups display a polish, precision and similarity of foundational aesthetic forms and choices that evokes an aura of internationalism, orthodoxy, and official heritage (if not royalty and aristocracy) far from the rustic or kitsch appeal more typical of folk-artistic production. Folk artistic production persists of course, but one suspects that it represents a shrinking segment of the total aesthetic universe of Thai Buddhist material culture. And to the degree that it does persist, how has it been shaped by revivalist movements that, in seeking to preserve local artistic heritage, also unintentionally foster some degree of aesthetic simplification, standardization and serial replication?

Finally, Wat Phai Rong Wua's Hell Garden exemplifies quite nicely a strain of religious and ceremonial aesthetics that celebrates an unabashed, ribald sensuality and eroticism. Amulets of phalluses and conjoined naked couples, erotic and risqué scenes of sexual intimacy painted on the walls of temples, and the sexualized symbolism that permeates rituals such as the Bun Bang Fai festival are a few obvious examples of unapologetic sensuality and eroticism which are valorized in circles outside the bourgeoisie and upper classes. As the case of Luang Phor Khom's Hell Garden reveals, however, it is subject to criticism and even censorship on the part of those latter elites, which can disproportionately exert their influence through the mass media and institutions of formal education. How the playful, subversive sensibility that accompanies such ribald eroticism will fare in the future is unclear. A button-downed, bourgeois aesthetic sensibility that perceives the mixing of "religion" and "sexuality" as not only improper but unorthodox and destructive enjoys increasing reach and breadth. Will such eroticized forms of religious aesthetics be preserved primarily as examples of an earthy folk heritage worthy of nostalgic celebration at a distance *via* museums or books rather than through active participation in the immediacy of a ceremonial present?

Benedict Anderson's provocative, insightful discussion of Wat Phai Rong Wua's Hell Garden has helped clarify and question these three fates, opening up topics and avenues of investigation that warrant future research. If we are lucky, others will take up the challenge and carry the discussion forward.

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