

**Book review: Giuseppe Bolotta: Belittled Citizens  
- The Cultural Politics of Childhood on Bangkok's  
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These minor shortcomings should not distract the reader from the strengths of this book. Given the recent studies on regional experiences of Sufi orders, particularly in Bengal and Deccan, by Richard Eaton, Carl Ernst and Nile Green among others, this book is a welcome addition to the growing field. Focusing on Gujarat and utilising several rare and under-utilised manuscripts, Jyoti Balachandran has produced a wonderful study on how the past was remembered and transcribed in texts. Although the historical authenticity of such later accounts may be questioned, they nevertheless help us in understanding how posterity imagined the ancestral past, imparted historical depth to their lineages and employed the authority of prominent figures in new ways.

The study reminds one of the Chishtī-Ṣābrī order, where accounts of the 13th–14th century figures are initially meagre but become abundant and extensive in 17th century and later *tazkirahs*, linking the founder of the order (‘Alī Ṣābir, ca. d. 1291) more closely to his spiritual mentor Farīd al-Dīn “Ganj-i Shakar” and providing copious amounts of information, mainly based on oral traditions or intuition (*kashf*) of his immediate successors. Balachandran’s book will enable scholars to have a more nuanced approach towards such later accounts, often side-lined as apocryphal or unhistorical. It is certainly a book to be recommended.

Moin Ahmad Nizami

GIUSEPPE BOLOTTA, *Belittled Citizens. The Cultural Politics of Childhood on Bangkok’s Margins*. (Monograph Series 154). Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2021. 252 pages, 9 illustrations, 1 map, £22.50. ISBN 978-8-7769-4301-1 (pb)

Giuseppe Bolotta’s *Belittled Citizens* is an academic work about the politics of childhood for urban poor children in Bangkok. Based on extensive fieldwork over the past decade, during which the author spent long stretches of time in a “living-in experience” among the urban poor in slums over various visits, the writing provides a holistic and intimate picture of the multitude of lives of *dek salam* (slum children) vis-à-vis the authoritarian monarchical and tendentially militaristic paternalism of “Thainess”. Having conducted extensive fieldwork of a similar kind among urban poor activists in Jakarta myself, I know what a taxing as well as rewarding task it is.

To my knowledge, the book is among very few academic works published on urban poor children generally and is therefore very relevant as a new publication shedding light on the most forgotten among the most marginalised in Bangkok’s slums. Moreover, the author is able to bring about a very colourful,

sometimes cheerful, account of children's lives – thereby carrying a note of hope throughout the entire book, despite describing extremely precarious conditions.

The first of two parts of the work looks into the cultural politics of children's lives in Thailand by referring to concepts of the “good Thai child”, the Buddhist concept of karma in respect to poverty, the Catholic / Christian understanding of God's love for the poor as well as the cosmopolitan-humanitarian NGO-based discourses of victimhood. Part two is about Thai children's multiple selves as well as how Thai children perform, contest and go beyond the “Thai Self” that is related to the concept of the good Thai child. Throughout the chapters, Giuseppe Bolotta constructs, de-constructs, re- and co-constructs *dek salam* identity (politics) vis-à-vis the Thai state, society and military – a scholarly solid and very organised treatise.

With great attention to detail, the author describes the concept of Thainess and what this means for the *dek salam* in relation to or in opposition to *phu yai* (big persons). I agree with the author when he constructs the Thai Self in light of a Thai society that has now become thoroughly militarised. The author attempts to show how *dek salam* challenge the conditions of Thai Self and militarisation, yet his explanation remains only superficial. Bolotta could have taken a step into theory by including civil-military relations (CMR) theory, and perhaps even made a potentially ground-breaking theoretical contribution. CMR theory suggests that there is an ongoing struggle for democratic control of the citizens of a state vis-à-vis the military and is based on the assumption that citizens of legal age (civil society) are the most important stakeholders in that democratic exercise of citizens' duty. In fact, Bolotta's work suggests otherwise: from an early age on, children already play the role of challenging, contesting and criticising military ideology, discourse and actions (such as “show of force”, etc.).

An additional minor criticism of the book is that it often seems to emphasise the very positive impact of one particular Catholic organisation. The work thereby seems to suggest that there is some sort of Christian-only solution to accommodating *dek salam* and giving them prospects for a brighter future. As a core object of analysis, the organisation itself could have been reviewed more critically, in my opinion. In the same vein, an Italian priest, referred to as Father Nicola, seems to be the undoubted hero and saviour of the urban poor children. I do not wish to imply that the author is replicating here the trope of the white(-man) as saviour, but he could have inserted a healthy critique of religion here as well as of the Catholic church as a patriarchal institution involved in child sex abuse around the world, despite its obviously beneficial role for Bangkok's urban poor and the Thai education system. Moreover, it would have been better to refer to more than just Buddhist and Catholic (religious) institutions. The book seems to suggest a binary religious choice, yet in Thailand there is a sizeable Muslim minority and there are certainly some Protestant Christian communities

as well as other religious minorities. Involving those, albeit briefly, would have painted a more inclusive picture.

All in all, the author has managed to produce both an empirical study with strong data collected over a long period of time as well as, by referring to a huge number of sources, a theoretical study of the humanities that will serve the field of Thai/Southeast Asian Studies over a long time. The great achievement of Giuseppe Bolotta is that he gives attention and agency to those who might hardly have been given any say in any discourse whatsoever before: urban poor children – the future adults of tomorrow. Academic discourses on the urban poor are in need of more research of this sort. That is why I highly recommend this book for teaching in the field of Southeast Asian Studies as well as in poverty and migration research. Giuseppe Bolotta's work has the potential to become a core reading for these fields. Despite my minor criticisms, the book deserves a wide readership outside of academia as well, because the (urban) poor need to be given more attention and their voices need to be documented and heard.

*Mark Philip Stadler*