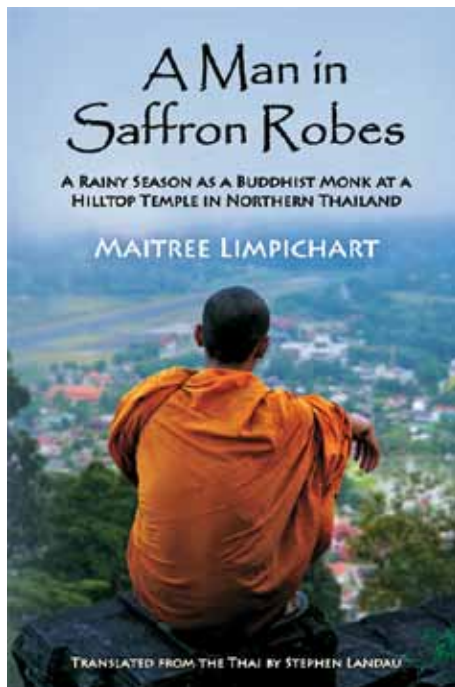


to be in the global arena, must also depend on the regular support and cooperation of smaller states and trade networks. Ironically, what rings truest of all to the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader of this book is that, even back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was the transnational trade and the business/capitalist networks of overseas Chinese merchants that prevailed despite strenuous state regulations and monopolies of both the Great Qing Empire and Siam under the Ayutthaya kings. At the end of the day, it is trade and capital—which is in itself without nationality and owes absolute loyalty only to the highest bidder—that has the final say on the balance of power, not only within the Greater East Asian region, but also in the wider global arena as a whole.

Wasana Wongsurawat

*A Man in Saffron Robes: A Rainy Season as a Buddhist Monk at a Hilltop Temple in Northern Thailand* by Maitree Limpichart, translated by Stephen Landau (New York: Middle Way Multimedia & Publishing Services, 2013). ISBN 978-1481863094. US\$15.12.



Titled *Khon Nai Phaa Leuang* in the original Thai edition, published in 1980, Maitree Limpichart's memoir documents his decision and early preparation to enter the monkhood, the reasons why he decided to spend his retreat at the remote hilltop temple, Wat Prathat Doi Kong Mu, in the (then) even remoter province of Mae Hong Son before describing his daily routine, feelings and thoughts during that period. This edition is a translation of Maitree's book by Stephen Landau, a former Peace Corps volunteer and later staff member in Thailand; his company is also the publisher of this book, which has previously published photos of Maitree's ordination and other events during his monkhood. The book is divided into 42 vignettes, or short stories, which makes reading the entire book in

sequence, or choosing particular stories at random, easy enough.

This memoir harks back to a different era, but not that far back. Bangkok was a large bustling metropolis where the pressures of urban life were ubiquitous. By comparison, Mae Hong Son was still cut off from the rest of the country. Yet, in 1974, Maitree Limpichart, the renowned author, newspaper columnist and former

government official, at the advanced age of thirty-three, left his wife and two children in Bangkok to don the saffron robes as a Buddhist monk for a period of three months during *Phansa*, or Buddhist Lent. In order to gain the most spiritual experience from his limited time, he decided to travel as far as possible from Bangkok to Mae Hong Son, situated close to Thailand's north-west frontier with Myanmar. There he participated in the daily routine of the *Sangha*, the brotherhood of monks, and interacted with the local community.

Maitree carefully considers what it means to become a monk in Thailand, the role of the *Sangha* in Thai society, the changes taking place in rural life and the growing dichotomy between agrarian and urban societies. This reviewer has attended several ceremonies for initiates to the monkhood, but had never previously considered the anxiety each man must feel on entering a completely new life with a new set of rules, if only temporarily. Maitree, as a monk, provides plenty of food for thought in this regard, saying, "...we are merely men in saffron robes—with all the frailty and imperfection that that implies—and nothing more." (p. xxi)

Maitree has a keen eye, and his description of his fellow monks, the temple environment and his daily routine during his time in the *Sangha*, not to mention the remote backdrop and stunning scenery of Mae Hong Son, makes for a number of interesting, if brief, storylines. These include among others: preparing for and enduring the initiation ceremony; the trials of putting on the saffron robe so that it does not fall down; the difficulties of learning various prayers; dealing with family and friends as a monk; the terrible hunger pains initiates experience when not eating after noon; interaction with other monks and lay people; the position in society of, and discrimination and poverty endured by, hill tribes peoples; the role and issue of Buddhist faith itself and the position of the *Sangha* in Thai society; and disrobing and returning to lay life.

It is clear from Maitree's positive description of his time in the *Sangha* that, despite his initial trepidation and difficulties, homesickness and actually falling ill, his time as a monk "brought me peace of mind and the greatest happiness I've known." (p. 279) Stephen Landau's translation turns Maitree's narrative into an easy and comprehensible read, even for those not thoroughly familiar with the Thai ceremonies and rituals described. For those considering their routine lives on the treadmill of urban life, this lovely little book certainly provides plenty to contemplate.

Paul Bromberg