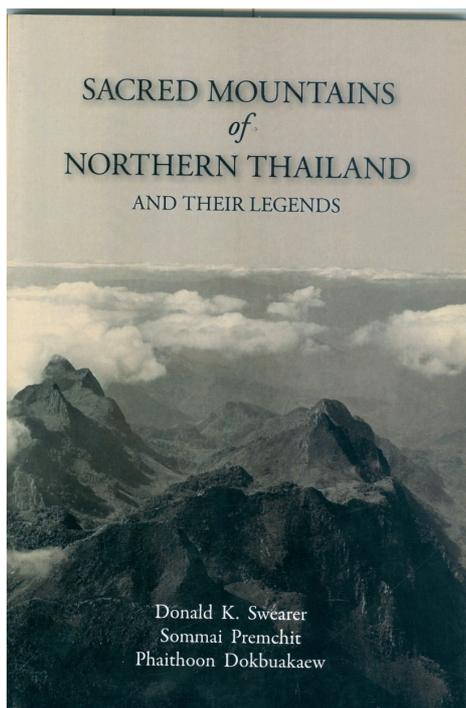


BOOK REVIEW

Swearer, Donald K., Sommai Premchit, and Phaithoon Dokbuakeaw. 2004. *Sacred Mountains of Northern Thailand and Their Legends*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Press.



In this slender volume, Swearer and his co-authors provide readable translations of *tamnans* ('legendary histories,' in Swearer's translation) that show the central role of the mountains of Doi Ang Salung Chiang Dao, Doi Suthep, and Doi Kham in Northern Thai political and religious histories. These legendary histories provide glimpses of how people at the time they were compiled thought about history, geography, and the place of humans in the larger universe. However, they are even more important now given concerns about globalization and climate change because they offer alternative ways of appreciating and valuing local environments.

Swearer is the sole author of the first two chapters and the introductions to the chapters on Doi Ang Salung and Doi Suthep. The translations are a collaborative effort among all the authors and Swearer, in the preface, acknowledges the importance of the group effort and that the translators' role is the volume was crucial.

The book begins with a chapter that provides the wider perspective on the role of religions and culture in global environmental issues. Here Swearer argues for a greater incorporation of ethics and an appreciation of human values in development and globalization. Religions, in general, and Buddhism in particular direct our attention the interrelationships among people, their values and beliefs, and the larger ecosystem that includes all living beings. Buddhism with its analysis of the causal interrelationships among all these elements is an essential resource for establishing and maintaining environments where humans can flourish.

In the second chapter, Swearer shows how these particular legendary histories relate to the larger issues raised in the first chapter and goes on to provide an introduction to both sacred mountains and the stories associated with Doi Ang Salung Chiang Dao, Doi Suthep, and Doi Kham. Swearer suggests, "Both oral and written traditions codify the mythic, legendary, and historical significance of the mountains for present and future generations" (22–23).

The heart of the volume is chapters three and four where Swearer and his collaborators present the translations of the legendary histories. Chapter three contains the translations of the Doi Ang Salung Chiang Dao *tamnan* as well as the translation of the legend of Chao Luang Kham Daeng who is associated with

Chiang Dao Cave. Chapter four has the legend of Doi Suthep and Doi Kham. These are not literal translations of the legendary histories, rather the authors have reorganized the accounts and put in section headings to make them more readable for non-specialists. The numerous footnotes provide explanations of terms, units of measure, and more scholarly discussions about the nature of popular Buddhism and variations in the texts.

The legendary histories of Doi Ang Salung and Doi Suthep are quite different and each provides a different glimpse into the worldview and beliefs about mountains, the role of the Buddha in establishing sacred sites, and the ways in which people and supernatural beings interact. In the account of Doi Ang Salung we get three interconnected stories about the Buddha's travel to the mountain, the decline of Buddhism, and the place of Chiang Dao cave in re-establishing a righteous ruler that restores the moral order. The story of Chao Luang Kham Daeng complements this history. The history of Doi Suthep focuses more the history of the relic that is enshrined on Doi Suthep and the history of northern Thai rulers and their relationships with the relic. The segment of the legendary history of Doi Kham adds further details about events that were left out of the Doi Suthep story and provides information on the relationship between Doi Suthep and Doi Kham.

The post-script returns to our attention to the issues of preserving local cultural understandings of the environment and our place in it as important means of ameliorating and limiting the negative effects of globalization and development. Swearer reinforces the importance of these legendary histories stating, "these narratives ascribe to Lan Na a sacredness that it would

otherwise lack, and like any good story, they have the power to fire the imagination and commitment of those who love Chiang Mai's mountains as a work of nature and culture. Pu Sae, Ya Sae (guardian spirits), Wasuathep, Wilangkha, (ascetics), Chamatewi (a queen), and the Buddha consecrated these mountains. Now it is our turn to protect them" (92).

This is a clear and accessible introduction to legendary histories. The translations are lively and engaging and the introduction and notes make it possible for a visitor or a beginning scholar to enjoy the text. The numerous photos help make vivid the environments described in the translations. *Sacred Mountains of Northern Thailand and Their Legends* is a valuable and useful addition to the more scholarly studies of *tamnan* and the analysis of myth and ritual in Thailand.

Reviewed by
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