

Tyler A. Lehrer

2018 Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Fellowship Report  
Central and Southern Thailand

With the generous support of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Fellowship, I was able to conduct archival and Buddhist temple-based research in Bangkok, Ayutthaya, Prachinburi, and Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand into the “usable histories” of eighteenth-century religious and diplomatic networks in the eastern Indian Ocean. Supplementing historical research in Sri Lanka conducted earlier in the summer, my month of pre-dissertation research in central and southern Thailand yielded key insights about the ways in which Theravāda Buddhist connections between Siam and Lanka have been invoked and imagined in mediating religious and political affiliation, the galvanization of ethnic difference, and the work of Buddhist lineage revival in the management of increasingly large and complex eighteenth-century suzerainties on opposite sides of the Bay of Bengal.

My proposed dissertation project enters the world of the mid-eighteenth-century Indian Ocean to follow tenuous and unlikely linkages between Siamese and Lankan Buddhist monks, monarchs, and the governors and ministers of the Dutch East India Company. Between the 1730s and 1760s, each of these stakeholders were instrumental in bringing about the revival of the monks’ ordination lineage within the Kandyan kingdom (ca. 1469-1815), a politically and religiously-legitimizing move orchestrated by the monarchs and courtiers of the kingdoms of Ayutthaya (ca. 1351-1767) and Kandy both.

During my research at key archives, libraries, and temples in Bangkok, Ayutthaya, and in the southern Malay peninsula, I was able to access texts and documents chronicling the success of the Kandyan revival in Thai-language sources in the eighteenth through twentieth



*Late-seventeenth-century temple mural from Wat Phutthaisawan, Ayutthaya depicting Somdet Phra Kosajarn's trip to venerate the Buddha footprint in Sri Lanka*

centuries. My research in Thailand greatly benefitted from access to the National Archives and Library in Bangkok, the Prince Damrong Library, as well as examining first hand several temples and Dutch colonial sites associated with the revival in Ayutthaya and Nakhon Si Thammarat. Ultimately, I hope to be able to demonstrate that the Kandyan monastic revival took place at the nexus of multiple religious and political formations that came to define social, cultural, economic, and ethnic divisions in an increasingly interconnected maritime world.

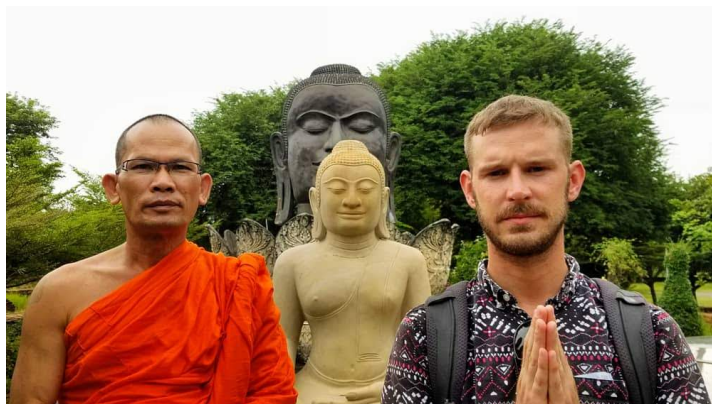
First, we have the Kandyan kingdom surrounded on all sides by Dutch protectorates and ruled by a succession of self-consciously foreign-born “Nayakkar” kings anxious to boost their Buddhist credentials. Second, Ayutthaya and Kandy enthusiastically engaged in religious and diplomatic correspondence with one another, mediated by the economic ambition of the Dutch VOC whose maritime and financial prowess made the revival possible in the first place. Finally, these events took place during the waning decades of Ayutthaya’s supremacy as a powerful center of transregional trade and accumulated wealth, eager to play up its Buddhist vitality and return the “gift” of *dhamma* to Lanka.

The particular ways and the forums in which the success of the monastic revival is narrated in Southern Asia provide clues into an interregional process that came to define salient modes of difference (though not yet ‘ethnicity’ as a ready-made concept), the political and religious work of lineage, as well as glimpses into the emotions and quotidian experiences of the increasingly mobile lives of everyday people in the Eastern Indian Ocean.

As a third-year history doctoral student, I find myself poised to undergo comprehensive examinations and the submission of my dissertation proposal in the Spring. My time spent in Southern Asia this summer with the help of a Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Fellowship was invaluable for clarifying the scope and direction of my



Plaque commemorating the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the monastic revival with Thai and Lankan religious and governmental signatories, Wat Thammaram, Ayutthaya



Chatting with one of the resident monks at Wat Thammikarat, Ayutthaya

dissertation project, identifying key collections, sites, and documents for further examination on subsequent research trips, and helping me to cement important connections with a number of scholars, graduate students, and librarians and monks at Thai archives, collections, libraries, and temples with whom I can enjoy many productive conversations and connections for years to come.