This excellent collection of papers contests the assumption that the term ‘Theravāda Buddhism’ has had a homogeneous and consistent referent from the early centuries of Buddhist history. Peter Skilling sets the scene in the introduction by expressing concern at how confidently the term has been used, ‘assuming that questions have been answered when they have not even been formulated’ (p. xxi). He offers data to suggest that, in the pre-modern period, ‘Theravāda’ had no application outside the monastic Saṅgha and hazards a definition — ‘a monastic lineage and a textual transmission of ethics, metaphysics, narratives — the Pali Canon — and the ritual practices of monasticism and liturgy’ (p. xxii). Skilling, however, realizes that this leaves many questions unanswered. This excellent collection of articles seeks to formulate the questions and offers some answers through historical and contextual analysis, focusing particularly on issues of self-definition and exclusion.

The book contains twelve chapters of differing lengths, ordered chronologically. Some began their life at a full-day panel, ‘How “Theravāda” is Theravāda?’, at the XVth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies (Atlanta 2008). Each chapter, concerned with different aspects of the ambit of the question, is worthy of mention in this review. So, embracing the risk that I will reduce the complexity of each argument, I endeavour to survey the whole collection.

Rupert Gethin begins by critically examining ‘the sense of Buddhist identity as revealed in Pali works composed in “Laṅkā” (or in some cases perhaps in Southern India) up to the end of the twelfth century CE’ (p. 3). First, he surveys the Pali texts for mention of the word ‘Theravāda’, finding just one instance in the canonical texts — where it was certainly not the name of a Buddhist school — and 34 in the commentaries, 23 of which refer to the opinion or view of an elder monk or monks. As for the term ‘theravādin’, he concludes that it was probably used only three times in pre-twentieth century Pali literature and ‘only once before the twelfth century’ (p. 13). His findings, therefore, suggest that contemporary use of the term ‘Theravāda’ was all but unknown before the twentieth century. Secondly, concentrating on the Samantapāsādikā and the Vinayaṭṭhakathā, he asks whether, within the Mahāvihāra, there was a sense of identity that drew distinctions between ‘self’ and other, less authentic schools. His conclusion is that the school did not define itself through a split between the Theriyas and the Mahāsāṅghikas or indeed any other split but through ‘a single lineage of teachers’ (p. 30–1), a non-sectarian lineage of Theras. Only in the Kathāvathu-ṭṭhakathā does this sense of identity seem to refer to a school or lineage in contrast to others (p.10), but Gethin suggests that this should be equated with theriya-vāda, the tradition belonging to the elders and not a school separate from any other.

The paper from Lance Cousins that follows concerns the split or formal breach between the Mahāvihāra and the Abhayagiri monastic schools in ‘Ceylon’. The former, Cousins states, referred to itself as the Theriya or, in time, Theravādin school, adding that a word equivalent to Theriya was used in external sources to describe
both these two schools, along with the Jetavanavihāra. In a closely argued paper, Cousins demonstrates that there is no evidence for a split between the first two fraternities before the third century CE, contesting the view that the split occurred two centuries earlier, and no evidence that three separate monastic nikāyas existed before the sixth century CE. He further argues that the first split did not lead to substantially different textual traditions, although differences between the Visuddhimagga and the Vimuttimagga point to divergences in interpretation. Cousins, therefore, disproves popular views that the split was one between ‘Theravāda’ Buddhism and a Mahāyāna-influenced Buddhism, with the former gaining victory.

The next contribution, by Max Deeg, examines equivalents in Chinese Buddhist writing to the Sanskrit sthavira and Pali therā, and discusses whether and when these terms became ‘loaded with denominational connotation and Hīnayāna-critical rhetorical undertones’ (p. 129). Arguing that sthavira/therā were translated through the term shangzuo (high-seated), and that the first references to the term were in the fourth and early fifth centuries CE, he demonstrates that its use changed in China from being ‘a purely honorific title in the canonical texts to usages that concerned specific monastic functions’ (p. 135), neither of which referred to a school of practice. In the Tang period, however, the term shangzuo-bu occurred frequently and this did refer to denominational or nikāya affiliation. The significance of school affiliation, however, is downplayed in China during these early periods. Even in the Tang period, eminent Sri Lankan monastic visitors could come to China and not be defined by their school or nikāya affiliation. Even Xuanzang himself could coin the term Mahāyānasthavira-nikāya to ‘upgrade’ sthavira monastic communities who were open to Mahāyāna practices, such as the Abhayagiri.

After Deeg come two chapters on Myanmar that contest the view that its Buddhist history can be defined by a move from Mahāyāna to Theravāda in the eleventh century, under the influence of the Mahāvihāra. Lilian Handlin re-evaluates the history of eleventh century ‘Pagan’, presenting a much less homogeneous picture than the traditional view suggests. Significantly, she fails to find a contemporary eleventh century use of the word ‘Theravāda’. She asserts that, instead, from the eleventh century onwards Theravāda Buddhism (as it is now known) in Myanmar became ‘a kaleidoscopic work in progress’ (p. 231). Jason Carbine then examines inscriptive evidence from fifteenth century lower Myanmar to explore the spatial significance of two phrases, sāsanasuddhi and sīmāsammuti, focussing particularly on their relevance to ideas about monastic lineage and ‘the importance of a righteous king as guardian of the Sāsana’ (p. 248). In line with other writers in the volume, he found no mention of the term ‘Theravāda’ in the inscriptions, although dhammavādi and vibhajjavādi appear, suggesting influence from the Mahāvihāra in Sri Lanka (p. 251). The two phrases Carbine examines are spatial and locational terms, and he argues that, rather than the application of lineage or school labels, the correct drawing of the simā and the assembling of a quorum was the means of validating ordination ceremonies and maintaining purity within the ‘Sāsana’. At the end, he suggests that a study of how the term ‘Sāsana’ has been used would yield useful information on mapping Buddhist forms of identity, supplementing work on the term ‘Theravāda’ with other conceptual orientations.

In order to explore the terms used ‘by groups of Buddhist monks to express monastic affiliation and difference’, for instance theravāda or theravamsa (p. 275),
Anne Blackburn, in the next chapter, examines three instances when lineage and ordination became objects of reflection and narration within Sri Lankan monastic communities. The first takes place in the late eighteenth century when new chapters were added to the vamsa literature about the importation of monastic lineages to the island. In these, the imported lineages were not described as theravādin or part of a theravāmaṇḍa (p. 279). Rather, the purity of the lineage was affirmed by reference to the simā, the discipline or the level of patronage. The second concerns letters written by Ven. Hikkaduvē Sumangala in the nineteenth century to Buddhist leaders in Siam and Burma to explore whether they could aid the uniting of the Sri Lankan monastic community. In one letter to Burma, he uses the term ‘theravāmaṇḍa’ to refer to different lineages but Blackburn concludes that this refers to ‘an ordination line of theras’ rather than to monks holding ‘a specifically Theravādin hermeneutical position’ (p. 286). Her third instance occurs in the context of anti-Christian revivalism at the end of the nineteenth century when monks from Sri Lanka’s three fraternities requested the Siamese king to form a new ecclesiastical council that could, ‘oversee the saṅghas of Siam, Burma and Lankā’. The request included a history of lineage transmission in the region but did not use the terms Theravāda or Mahāvihāra, although ‘Southern Buddhism’ was used in related literature. Blackburn’s conclusion stresses the variety of terms and narrative strategies to report or claim monastic transmission, inheritance and collective belonging’ (p. 291). She concludes, ‘Looking for the theravāda is an important part of our research. Looking only for the theravāda will make it more difficult to discern other traces of monastic debate, collaboration and subjectivity’ (p. 292).

The next five chapters focus on Cambodia and Thailand. First, Peter Skilling examines a snapshot of pre-modern Thailand: the patronage King Rāma I gave to Buddhism at the end of the eighteenth century through building and re-building temples. Skilling asks whether what happened was Theravādin and replies in the affirmative, since it was centred on a monastic lineage that stemmed from the Mahāvihāra. But — and it is an important but — the word ‘Theravādin’ or ‘Theravāmaṇḍa’ was not used self-consciously as a mark of identity. It was the ‘“ur-identity” of the monastic tradition’ (p. 330). One point he makes is that ‘the idea of Theravāda’ needs an ‘other’ in order to function and in the Thai world this was lacking. Therefore, he argues, what happened at the end of the eighteenth century was ‘Theravāda’ but not because it embodied an unchanging Theravāda or Pali imaginaire. Rather, there had been rupture, reformulation and reformation, and the emergence of a wealth of textual material in addition to what has now been ‘romanized’. Nonetheless, this phase could be termed Theravāda because there was a ‘databank, a fount of ideas, a system or network of references and coordinates’ (p. 345) that could be drawn on and combined with ‘vernacular imaginaires’ (p. 347).

The research presented in the next chapter by Claudio Cicuzza began in conversation with Skilling and offers the Pali text and English translation of the prefatory chapter of Cicuzza’s edition of the Paramatthamaṅgala (The Ultimate Blessing, i.e. ordination), a piece of Thai Buddhist literature that combines the Pali imaginaire and the vernacular. It is fitting illustration of Skilling’s argument. The next chapter by Olivier de Bernon also illustrates the point that the Theravāda tradition should not be seen through the lens of a ‘fixed number of Pali texts’ (p. 371). This corpus is just one stream within a ‘complex of identities’ that
reaches far beyond the textual. De Bernon illustrates this through the examination of an inscription from nineteenth century Cambodia that lists 27 canonical and paracanonical texts offered to a monastic library.

Venerable Anil Sakya then studies King Mongkuk’s invention of a universal Pali script, the ‘Ariyaka’ alphabet, in the nineteenth century. The modernist Mongkuk emphasized Buddhism’s rationality and sought, according to Anil Sakya, to inaugurate a new, pan-Asian, written Pali culture. It did not take hold, although Sri Lankan bhikkhus did make some use of it. In particular, they certainly used it in their communication with Thai bhikkhus in their common struggle against Christian missionaries.

After this, Arthid Sheravanichkul examines letters from King Chulalungkorn to Prince Narisranuvattiwong that attempt to explain the differences between Hinayana and Mahayana, demonstrating that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, this distinction was recognized in Thailand, probably because of the presence of Mahayana Buddhists from China and Vietnam, and western orientalist scholarship. This is a fascinating study of the impact of orientalism on Asian Buddhist identities. And it touches the final, crucial chapter by Todd Perreira, who attempts to trace when and how the term ‘Theravada’ came to be used to refer to a form of Buddhism present in South and Southeast Asia rather than to a set of texts of a monastic lineage. He begins with the 1950 inaugural conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Kandy and G.P. Malalasekera’s successful proposition that the term ‘Theravada’ should replace ‘Hinayana’. After offering a ‘timeline chronology’ and survey of the usage of the terms ‘Hinayana’, ‘Theravada’ and ‘Mahayana’ in the West, he argues that ‘Hinayana’, as a designation for non-Mahayana Buddhism, only began at the end of the nineteenth century with the Japanese presence at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago. ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ Buddhism preceded it. As for the term ‘Theravada’, he argues convincingly that the first time it was used to describe whole communities of Buddhists in South and Southeast Asia was in the writings of the British bhikkhu, Ananda Metteyya (Allan Bennett), when he was in Thailand in 1907. Whilst this is an important study, Perreira’s work contains some errors. For instance, Wesleyan Methodist missionary in Sri Lanka, Robert Spence Hardy, in addition to his initial 22 years, returned to Sri Lanka in 1863 for a further two years. He also wrote more than two books (p. 477). Use of a greater number of secondary sources would have helped here, such as Barbara Coplans’ doctoral dissertation on Spence Hardy, Prothero’s study of Olcott, or my own monograph on the encounter between the British and Buddhism in Sri Lanka. However, this is a magisterial and most significant chapter that demonstrates convincingly that the contemporary use of the term ‘Theravada’ is a relatively recent phenomenon.¹

The book is beautifully illustrated with images of temple art, buildings, artefacts, documents and key people in the history of Buddhism, making the book an artefact in itself, beautiful to hold and read. The chapters are of varying lengths and each is meticulously referenced. The editing is so good that I did not find one typographical error. I thoroughly recommend this book. It opens up a field of Buddhist studies that every teacher and scholar of Buddhism should be aware of.

¹ Though Anālayo pp.221–22 above, cites an eighteenth century Burmese example.