



Figures of Buddhist Modernity in Asia

Edited by Jeffrey Samuels, Justin Thomas McDaniel, and Mark Michael Rowe. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016, xxii + 218 pages, ISBN 978-0-8248-5854-4 (cloth), \$65.00.

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F*igures of Buddhist Modernity in Asia* presents a dynamic, composite picture of Buddhists throughout Asia. It includes sixty-six vignettes by sixty-two contributors, who sketch profiles of sixty-seven Asian Buddhist figures, born between 1910 and 1989, of whom fifty-nine are still alive and eight are deceased. Most vignettes profile a single person, who is distinct from the author, but two vignettes are unusual: one vignette profiles two figures, and another is autobiographical. Each two-to-three-page vignette illustrates the often radically different ways people can relate to, and thereby shape, “Buddhism.” In brief, the book offers a wealth of information about modern Buddhism and succeeds marvelously in depicting an entertaining “cacophony of voices” (12) expressing what Buddhism can involve and what being a Buddhist can entail. Below I summarize the purpose, structure, and some of the interesting findings in the book. Then I reflect on its limitations and possible alternatives for researching Buddhism in modernity.

In the introduction, the editors write that a fundamental goal of the volume is to show how “individual Buddhists make meaning” (9) and how such understandings reflect and contribute to networks of discourse and related practices. Another focus in many profiles is describing what individual Buddhists *qua* Buddhists do, and analyzing how (or simply *if*) such practices relate to traditional Buddhist teachings. Thus, the book implicitly probes the relationship between two constructions of Buddhism: 1) Buddhism as an evolving, flexibly deployed repertoire of practices among Buddhists, and 2) Buddhism as a set of teachings contained in authoritative texts and elite discourse. While sharing a concern with showing the “agency and creativity of individual Buddhists” (9), as in Todd Lewis’s edited volume *Buddhists* (2014), the editors distinguish this book by focusing less on exemplary figures and more on ordinary, “everyday Buddhists” (11), who the editors state are more representative in demonstrating what can typically be achieved through Buddhist practice.¹ Finally, the organization of the book is intended to encourage reflection on

¹ Whether the Buddhists in Lewis’s 2014 volume are mainly elite or ordinary Buddhists is debatable. See the review by John Powers in volume 17 (2016) of the *Journal of Global*

the limitations of more standard, “stultifying categories” such as “Mahāyāna” and “South Asia” (12).

Instead of grouping by sect, region, or nation, the editors divide the profiles between the following four sections, called “ways of looking,” depending on the figure’s relationship to Buddhism: 1) Looking Backward: Inventing Tradition in the Modern World, 2) Looking Forward: Social-Psychological Care in a Troubled World, 3) Looking Inward: New Asceticism in Modern Buddhism, and 4) Looking Outward: Local Buddhists Becoming Global Citizens. These categories are also labelled more succinctly as the themes of “invented traditionalism,” “social-psychological care,” “new asceticism,” and “globalism,” respectively (8). I found this method of classification refreshing and thought-provoking, and suitable to the range of materials the editors collected for this volume. I would also look forward to other innovative classification methods in studies of Buddhism.

On the other hand, this classification scheme has its limitations. I would question the editors’ views that traditional classifications of Buddhists are necessarily stultifying or that “most Buddhists spill out of the categories we devise to contain them” (8). I also sometimes had trouble connecting individual profiles to the categories they were intended to exemplify. If the profiles were reprinted on unnumbered, untitled sheets of paper and randomly assigned to one of the four “ways of looking,” the chance that a given profile would find its way to its intended category would be roughly 25%. If instead readers were assigned to place such unmarked profiles into their intended categories, I suspect their chances of success would not be significantly higher than 25%. But the editors are very aware their categories are not mutually exclusive, and the sometimes ambiguous connection between the profiles and categories does not detract from the individual vignettes.

I now turn from the book’s purpose and organization to its substantive claims. It is difficult to extract a univocal argument from a book written by sixty-two authors. Indeed, one purpose of the book is simply to exhibit the diversity and complexity of contemporary Buddhism. But a central thread, mentioned in the introduction and born out in the profiles, is the following: owing to developments in technology and travel, modern Buddhism is characterized by innovative constellations of hybrid practices and beliefs. Such practices and beliefs are hybrid in that they integrate elements from historically separate Buddhist traditions and from non-Buddhist cultural institutions. In this sense, Buddhism has always been hybrid to some degree. But in effect this book seems to argue that in modernity, such hybridity is quantitatively greater and qualitatively distinct from what has come before.

The volume does an excellent job of illustrating tensions—whether societal, interpersonal, or psychological—regarding proper Buddhist practices and social roles. For example, a number of vignettes reveal conflicts about the value of Buddhist nunhood and the legitimacy of higher ordination for nuns. One profile shows conflict in Sri Lanka over whether vipassana meditation is a proper Buddhist practice and whether the monastic opponent of such meditation was even sane (20). Other vignettes show tensions over the status of Japanese temple wives, traditional

Buddhism for a view that most are in fact ordinary.

authority structures, ethnicity and religious affiliation, Buddhist responses to communism, and the share of resources to be allocated to Buddhist institutions. The existence of such tensions suggests that in some ways Buddhism is best understood as an evolving set of questions (how to practice, what and how much to donate, etc.), with a fluctuating range of possible answers, rather than as a fixed set of propositional beliefs, injunctions, and actions.

Despite its person-centered approach, *Figures of Buddhist Modernity in Asia* also reveals networks of institutions through which modern Buddhists practice Buddhism or negotiate its practice. In fact, many of the figures are interesting precisely because of their involvement with various institutions, both conventional (i.e., cultural forms such as nun ordination, spirit mediumship, and New Age thought) and formal (i.e., organizations such as the Knowing Buddha Organization, the Chinese Communist Party, and the Thai Internal Security Operations Command). For example, a Japanese priest is a member of a Buddhist sect and the head of a local temple, but is also a university professor. The vignette demonstrates how, for this priest, his Buddhist heritage is a burden as much as a resource (23). A Sri Lankan woman, involved in a temperance movement ultimately stemming from earlier Christian movements, opposes the consumption of alcohol (41). And a Korean nun in the Chogye order attracts interest in Buddhist meditation practice by combining it with English language practice (158). These vignettes show how contemporary Buddhist practices in Asia are deeply intertwined with global, often originally Western, institutions such as universities, social movements, and pedagogies.

In sum, the book is a resounding success in showing, through the prism of individual lives, the diversity and complexity of modern Buddhism. It depicts a broad range of figures from most of the major traditions, regions, and countries of Buddhist Asia. The profiles are informative, entertaining, and generally strike a good balance between sympathetic portrayal and critical distance. Moreover, as the editors point out, the volume includes depictions of Buddhism being practiced through a wide range of media, including contemporary art and the Internet. In addition, the front and back matter, including two additional tables of content (displaying entries by tradition and region/country), a guide to further reading, and a substantial index, all add to the volume's value.

In assessing this volume, one unavoidable question pertains to the selection of figures included. While the criteria for inclusion at a general level were not discussed, the operative assumptions appear to be that the following types of people warranted inclusion: 1) self-identified Buddhists, particularly those recognized as Buddhist by a larger community; 2) people currently or formerly included in social categories associated with Buddhism (such as monastics and members of Buddhist castes); and 3) people involved in cultural activities associated with Buddhism (certain kinds of art or scholarship). Selecting figures through such criteria involves potentially contentious decisions, including which non-English concepts are equivalent to "Buddhist." If Buddhism is what Buddhists do, Buddhism can change

radically according to the analyst's standards for selecting Buddhists and deciding which of their practices is Buddhist.

Two potentially contentious issues relate to the selection of figures in the volume and how they are evaluated. Both issues raise for me minor qualms concerning how the vignettes are sometimes framed in introductory sections or how readers may interpret them. These qualms largely boil down to a sense that the profiles often portray and valorize certain kinds of Buddhists—namely cosmopolitan, cultural bricoleurs—who perhaps resemble the scholars who write about them. Among the profiles, there are numerous exceptions to this generalization, and there are advantages to such a selection, but there are also potential misinterpretations.

The first issue concerns the selection of the figures profiled. The profiles do not constitute a representative sample in any sense, whether between or within different types of Buddhists, nor do the editors claim that they do. In a representative sample based on the number of self-identified Buddhists in different social groupings, for example, the number of figures in the volume from China would be increased fourfold and those from the Vajrayāna tradition would be decreased at least fourfold. Nor do the figures, for the most part, constitute the leadership of institutions, whose orientations to some degree shape their followers. Rather, the contributors tended to write about interesting figures they already knew personally or knew about from research—particularly those who exemplified creativity and agency. That is, the figures profiled do not necessarily reflect numerically or institutionally dominant groups within the Buddhist world. Rather, these figures are largely those who have “elective affinities” with scholars of Buddhism. Such a selection is not inherently problematic and may very well have made for a particularly interesting book. Yet, it also suggests that any regularities found among the profiles may derive from the means of selection rather than from general trends in Buddhism. Thus the degree of internationalization, self-reflection, and creativity among the figures may make them unusual in Buddhist communities, and the experimental, hybrid practices some promote may be marginalized or even soon disappear and be forgotten. In a similar vein, I suggest that Buddhists whose activities have “elective dis-affinities” with scholars, even if they play important social roles, tend to be under-represented in this volume. So, for example, there are no profiles of Buddhists who are personally involved in organized violence against ethnic and religious minorities, even though such violence has recently been a central, national issue in countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and Bhutan.

The second issue concerns how the figures and their practices are evaluated. Introductory sections include evaluative statements suggesting that certain kinds of Buddhism are, in the eyes of the editors, preferable to other kinds of Buddhism. For example,

It [looking inward] should be approached as an equally engaged response to the pressures of everyday social, familial, and economic life—one that is just as active, innovative, and progressive as looking outward and forward (115).

In context, the editorial assumption seems to be that active, innovative, and progressive kinds of Buddhism are preferable to those that are socially aloof,

traditional, or conservative. Furthermore, throughout introductory passages in the book, words pointing to conservative orientations—*tradition*, *authentically*, *true*—are placed in scare quotations, apparently to highlight that such labels are contentious or even false (so “tradition” in scare quotes can mean “invented tradition,” i.e., innovation passed off as tradition). But other contentious terms—*innovative*, (fully ordained Theravāda) *nun*, *progressive*—are never placed in scare quotes. It is worth noting that many, probably most, Asian Buddhists do not share the “progressive” orientation from which such evaluations stem. Among many Tibetan Buddhist monks, for example, to call a doctrine an innovation is to denigrate it. Neither of my two qualifications detracts from the value of this book, but they give reason to pause before making generalizations based on the profiles.

Figures of Buddhist Modernity in Asia's greatest strengths include its creative organization and rich depictions of individual Buddhists. For the most part the book avoids speculation on the central features and trends in contemporary Buddhism, other than the proliferation of new, hybrid forms. Future studies, perhaps also with a focus on individuals, might address specifically which kinds of Buddhists are emerging as numerically dominant or socially powerful, and therefore likely to determine the public image and policies of Buddhism in their respective societies. Another strength of this volume lies in its depiction of individuals changing their relationships to Buddhism in different circumstances. In this vein, also welcome would be future studies investigating patterns in how people change their ways of being Buddhist at different stages of their lifecycles, or, in contrast, how the practice of Buddhism varies across different generations owing to unique historical circumstances.

This book could prove useful in academic courses, as the editors suggest (13). For courses focused on types of Buddhists, modern Buddhism, or interactions between Buddhist traditions, the book could be used as a central resource. For courses focusing on other topics such as history or doctrine, the book could serve as a supplement, particularly if excerpts could be made available. I believe *Figures of Buddhist Modernity in Asia* will also be of interest to practicing Buddhists who want a global perspective on what, in the words and actions of contemporary Buddhists, Buddhism is today.

References

- Lewis, Todd. 2014. *Buddhists: Understanding Buddhism Through the Lives of Practitioners*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Bass.