

## Book review

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### ***Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada.***

Edited by John S. Harding, Victor Sōgen Hori, and Alexander Soucy. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. 456 pp. ISBN 978-0773536661 (hardcover) \$95.00; ISBN 978-0773536678 (paperback), \$29.95.

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B o o k   R e v i e w

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Researchers interested in Canadian Buddhism will find much to appreciate in the new anthology *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada*. This subfield has had occasional publications of significance over the past two decades, but has frankly not been a robust area of research, especially when compared to the growth of works on American Buddhism since the mid-1990s. Thus *Wild Geese*, which is actually the culmination of slowly building groundwork in the subfield by a variety of authors (many but not all of whom are represented in this collection), also in some ways feels like a beginning of a sort: Buddhism in Canada has now arrived as a viable research area in its own right, and this volume can be expected to stimulate further projects and perhaps prompt graduate programs in Canada to begin paying greater attention to the subject.

The genesis of *Wild Geese* lies in two sessions on Canadian Buddhism held at the 2006 annual conference of the Canadian Asian Studies Association. Revised and updated papers from that meeting, as well as additional ones solicited by the editors, form the content of this anthology. They have been arranged into thematic sections: the opening essays (as well as the conclusion) are concerned with theoretical approaches to studying Buddhism in Canada; the second section is mainly historical; sections three and four are case studies, while the fifth section offers two in-depth biographical sketches of important Canadian Buddhists. The result is an accurate snapshot of the state of research on Buddhism in Canada at this time, from which some observations can be drawn. First, anthropological and especially sociological approaches dominate, with ethnography a primary method and historical work lagging far behind. Second, research is being undertaken by scholars at all levels of achievement, including current Ph.D. students, junior faculty, and senior faculty, as well as independent scholars. Third, while some scholars are specialists on modern global Buddhism, North American Buddhism, or even Canadian Buddhism specifically, others working in this subfield are also simultaneously drawn to other research projects on non-Buddhist religions or general religious phenomena in North America. Fourth, scholars are working on an impressively large range of communities and traditions, but there is little work in other possible veins with a wider focus, such as Buddhist impact on mainstream Canadian society or the role(s) of women across Buddhist Canada. And fifth, current research on Canadian Buddhism is often dependent on—and in some cases reactive against—recent work on Buddhism in the United States.

While *Wild Geese* opens with theoretical concerns, for the purpose of this review it makes more sense to treat the case studies first before moving to the more abstract essays. Terry Watada provides a historical look at the years 1905–1970, when Canadian Buddhism mostly belonged to Japanese-Canadians, and especially to the Jōdo Shinshū school. This material will be familiar to those who work on Japanese-Canadian religious history but may be new to non-specialists, and it performs the important task of pointing out how even Canadian Buddhism’s relatively short history needs to be periodicized. Henry Shiu picks up this theme and carries it to the present-day with his essay on Buddhism in Canada after the 1970s. He aptly notes a surge in both the bare number of Buddhists and in denominational diversity within the Canadian Buddhist community. Peter Beyer rounds out the overview section with useful data from recent Canadian censuses. As he notes, Buddhism is now the fourth largest religion in Canada, and it is numerically dominated by practitioners of Chinese ethnic background. Canadian Buddhists are mainly urban dwellers, most were born in Asia, and those who are second generation Canadians are (with the possible exception of Southeast Asian-Canadians) highly educated. Perhaps most interesting is the demonstration that the overwhelming majority of Canadian Buddhists are of Asian ancestry, whether born in Canada or elsewhere. Estimates on Buddhists in the United States almost invariably suggest a 75% Asian-derived, 25% other (Euro-American, Afro-American, etc.) split in American Buddhism. Canadian Buddhism is either significantly more Asian in ethnic origin than American Buddhism, or, perhaps, the estimates for American Buddhism are far from the mark. Either is an intriguing possibility, but since American censuses do not collect religious data (unlike Canadian ones) and projects like the American Religious Identification Survey are suggestive but less comprehensive than the census, it is difficult to draw a conclusion here. Another interesting observation that arises from Beyer’s findings is that while the number of Canadian Buddhists of non-Asian background has grown impressively, it has not kept pace as a proportion of Canadian Buddhism overall (indeed, it has slightly shrunk since 1980). Euro-Canadians and others are clearly increasingly drawn to Buddhism as a real religious option, but they are a far smaller part of the story than their Asian-Canadian fellows.

The third section of *Wild Geese* (“From Global to Local”) contains five case studies. Co-editor John Harding provides a study of rural Jōdo Shinshū in southern Alberta; Marybeth White offers a study of Lao-Canadian Buddhists that pays attention to sacred space and the organization of community; Patricia Campbell looks at Torontonians turning to Zen Buddhism to meet personal needs; and Lynn Eldershaw gives an overview of Shambhala Buddhism, with some attention to its role in Canada. Arguably the most significant essay in this section is Lina Verchery’s examination of the Woodenfish educational program run by Foguangshan. Woodenfish is a temporary ordination program that provides North American students with the chance to experience a monastic lifestyle for a month in Taiwan. Verchery ably charts the negotiations and struggles that take place between the students and their Taiwanese hosts and teachers. Her work demonstrates the need for much more research on some of the populations that she touches on, including Buddhism on campus, young Canadian Buddhists, and especially on the role played by non-Buddhists as consumers and transmitters of Buddhism in North America.

The book’s fourth section (“From Local to Global”) also provides case studies. Tannie Liu’s essay studies three Chinese-Canadian temples from three different lineages. She

demonstrates that these temples are part of a larger modernization movement within global Chinese Buddhism of the contemporary era. At the same time, the Canadian specificity of the Cham Shan monastery makes it of particular note. Her essay is also commendable because, while it only occupies part of her focus, the True Buddha School receives sustained attention. This large network of tantric Chinese temples has not received adequate scholarly attention. Readers will be more familiar with the Tzu Chi Merit Society, the subject of an essay by Andre Laliberte and Manuel Litalien. They solidly frame Tzu Chi Canada within a larger transnational context. Sarah Haynes looks at Tibetan Buddhism in Canada, particularly the questions of what attracts Canadians to Tibetan Buddhism and how it has been modified by lamas to attract new practitioners in the West.

The final subjects in the book are two biographies of important Canadian Buddhists. Albert Low may be familiar to some readers outside Canada, since some of his works on Zen have been widely circulated. A dharma heir of the late Philip Kapleau, Low is the leader of the Montreal Zen Centre and has worked tirelessly to adapt Zen practice to Canadian needs as he perceives them. Suwanda H.J. Sugunasiri, meanwhile, is if anything even more prominent in Canada than Low, but may not be known to international researchers. Over many years he has pursued a strategy of increasing public Buddhist visibility on the one hand, and drawing together multiple Buddhist communities into pan-sectarian projects and networks on the other. Their biographies (provided by Mauro Peressini, Victor Hori, and Janet McLellan) are included as part of an effort to draw attention to the role of important personalities in the transmission of Buddhism to Canada. Given that relatively little historical work has been done on Canadian Buddhism, and that the sociological focus of much current work tends to privilege large groups rather than specific individual stories, there would indeed seem to be a place for such contributions.

Overall, the case studies in *Wild Geese* manage to cover a large part of the Canadian Buddhist terrain, some familiar to researchers on Buddhism in the West, others less so. There are a few noticeable omissions—for example, given their importance in Canada, Sōka Gakkai and the vipassana movement are oddly absent from the book. And some major Canadian-specific groups, such as the Ontario Dharma Centre, still await a committed researcher. But these various studies provide much material for those interested in various Canadian Buddhist phenomena.

Also necessary for the emergence of a true subfield are discussions of theory and method. Many essays in *Wild Geese* touch on these concerns in some fashion, but they are the particular foci of Hori's opening essay, "How do We Study Buddhism in Canada?," and his co-editor Alexander Soucy's chapter, "Asian Reformers, Global Organizations: An Exploration of the Possibility of a 'Canadian Buddhism'." Both of these essays do a good job of raising important issues for researchers in this area to pay attention to. Hori provides six points for consideration in the study of Buddhism in Canada. First, he feels that researchers must resist the Asian/ethnic vs. Western/convert distinction that has been extensively used in published works on American and Canadian Buddhism. Hori alleges that there is an implicit racism to the use of these categories, which devalues or even delegitimizes the first of these two pairs, and recommends abandoning them. Second, he points out the need to collect more statistics on Buddhism in Canada and to recover more of Buddhism's history within Canada. Third, he argues for the need to pay attention to the life stories of Canadian Buddhists, such as Low and

Sugunasiri. Fourth, he calls for greater theoretical clarity in the study of Canadian Buddhism. Fifth, he says that Buddhism in Canada must be put into an explicitly global context and treated as a manifestation of a more general worldwide and transnational development in Buddhism. And, finally, he urges an evolution within the academic discipline of Buddhist Studies that gives greater respect to Buddhist phenomena outside of Asia and to fieldwork methods.

Soucy amplifies some of Hori's arguments, especially the need for a global rather than local perspective on Buddhism in Canada. He also spends significant time discussing how much that is taken to be North American adaptation is in fact largely the product of reforms and changes made in Asia by Asian Buddhists and subsequently exported to Canada and the United States.

Many of Hori and Soucy's arguments are on target and should be heeded by researchers in this area. Buddhist Studies would certainly be well served by a significant receptiveness to non-Asian and non-textual Buddhist subjects. And the calls for more research, especially historical work, are appropriate. There is indeed danger in reifying the ideas of ethnic vs. convert Buddhism, and in ignoring the global context of the various Buddhist groups and trends seen in Canadian Buddhism. Hori states overtly the conclusion that a few researchers on North American Buddhism have implicitly reached: so-called "Western" or "white" Buddhism is just another type of ethnic Buddhism, attuned in this case to the ethnic preferences, needs, and prejudices of a particular cultural group in Canada and the U.S. An argument can be made that there is no such thing as Buddhism in general, only various ethnic Buddhisms, whether Anglo-Canadian, French Canadian, Japanese-Canadian, etc. The editors are correct to state in their conclusion that both so-called "Asian" and "Western" Buddhisms are modern, and to argue vigorously against false stereotypes that would paint Asian and Asian-North American Buddhism as facilely "traditional" or unchanging.

At times, however, the arguments are taken too far. [White] Westerners are accused of using the terms "ethnic" and "Asian" for political purposes that create an "other" against which to identify and elevate the in-group. Certainly this is a genuine phenomenon in *some* cases, and we should be on guard against offensive or unnecessary uses of these distinctions, but the editors ignore the basic fact that Asian-Canadians and Asian-Americans have themselves frequently employed this terminology in their own communities, speaking of "Americans" or "Canadians" (meaning whites) and "Japanese" or "Chinese" (meaning Japanese-Americans/Canadians and so on, even if fourth or fifth generation North Americans). And there are times when it is perfectly reasonable to differentiate between the phenomena displayed by many Asian-Canadian Buddhist groups and those generally distinctive of white-dominated Canadian Buddhist groups, as indeed some of the authors in *Wild Geese* appropriately do. The problem is not so much that lines between Asian-North American and white/convert North American Buddhisms have been drawn, but that they have been drawn poorly at times (as Hori discusses) and can be made far too thick and impermeable. Researchers should therefore proceed with caution and be meticulous in defining these lines' usages (and their underlying logic), but this is something other than the wholesale rejection of these theoretical issues as irredeemably compromised.

A second case of an overstated argument in *Wild Geese* lies in the discussion of global vs. Canadian Buddhism. Most of the authors seem to view these as competing and mutually

exclusive concepts: either there is a distinctive Canadian form of Buddhism or there is nothing particularly noteworthy about Buddhism in Canada and it should be only treated as part of a global and apparently rather homogenous network. It is not entirely clear whether this was the intended message, or whether the tone happened to emerge as the various authors all shared their work and discussed the issues amongst themselves. But there is no need to frame the matter in such an antagonistic manner. Soucy, in an otherwise generally good essay, questions the idea that there is such a thing as either American or Canadian Buddhism and seems to be hostile to the search for such possibilities, preferring to keep our gaze firmly on the global. I would argue this is premature and overlooks the potentiality that while there may be no single American or Canadian Buddhism (and few people would suggest there are such things), there may well be a variety of different Canadian Buddhisms in the plural. For example, Canadian Jōdo Shinshū may differ from both Japanese and American Jōdo Shinshū. The Canadian Jōdo Shinshū temples exist in a network that connects them to Japan and the United States, but there are distinctive elements to the Japanese-Canadian Jōdo Shinshū experience. Their internment experience was, if anything, even harsher than that of their American fellows; they live in a far colder climate; they are a much smaller mass spread out over a much larger area; they have fewer resources, ministers, and institutions and must make do with older materials; they live in a country with an explicitly multicultural official federal policy; and they experienced a schism and the existence of a second Jōdo Shinshū entity (the Honpa Buddhist Church of Alberta) in their midst. These factors could potentially give a discernable character to Canadian Jōdo Shinshū and it would be unfortunate to discourage the exploration of such possibilities before they are adequately plumbed. Likewise, there are reasons to believe that overall Canadian Buddhism may display some differences from overall American Buddhism, and these may be fruitfully mined in the future. Just as a small example, in *Wild Geese* itself we see the attempt by Sugunasiri to create Canadian-specific Buddhist holidays. Clearly, Canadian Buddhists are in some cases seeking a *Canadian* Buddhism and doing so in ways that distinguish them from Buddhists south of the border. Soucy also makes the strange claim that Westerners [i.e., Euro-North Americans] have contributed comparatively little to the creation of a new Buddhism, preferring to give nearly all the credit to Asian reformers whether in Asia or as missionaries to North America. This is simply not accurate. Whether in the creation of new rituals for post-abortion traumas, the application of mindfulness meditation to nearly any and every facet of North American culture, or a myriad of other possible examples, these new Buddhists and “Buddhist sympathizers” have—with, of course, the participation and support at many times of Asian-North Americans—made significant changes and transmutations to Buddhist practice and belief (or, in some cases, nearly jettisoned belief entirely).

To conclude, the authors in *Wild Geese* sometimes over-reach in their criticisms of earlier research (most of it focused on American, not Canadian, Buddhism), and there are a few important players on the Canadian Buddhist landscape missing from this book. But this should not overshadow all that is right about *Wild Geese*. Put simply, this is the new landmark publication on the subject, and will be used by researchers and teachers interested in the topic for many years to come. It provides much needed direction toward theoretical coherence to an emergent subfield and is rich in case studies on specific Buddhist groups operating in Canada. Any of the essays could easily be assigned to undergraduate courses on Buddhism, North American religion, or transnational religious phenomena. For those

interested in Buddhism in Canada, *Wild Geese* is required reading. And even those who focus strongly on Buddhism in America should give *Wild Geese* their attention, as it will help them to put their studies into a more North American focus, and perhaps help them discern what is American about their subjects, what is North American, and what belongs to a modern world-spanning flow of Buddhist movements and developments.