
Book Review

Monks, Money, and Morality: The Balancing Act of Contemporary Buddhism

Edited by Christoph Brumann, Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko, and Beata Świtek. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, viii + 255 pages, ISBN 9781350213760 (Paperback), \$29.95; ISBN 9781350213753 (Hardback), \$90.

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The editors of *Monks, Money, and Morality* employ the term “sangha economies” rather than the more commonly used terms Buddhist economies, Buddhist economics, or economics/economies of Buddhism. “Lionel Obadia (2011) distinguishes Buddhism and economy (Buddhists and their interaction in the economy), from ‘Buddhist economics’ (normative claims based on an idealized or a romanticized Buddhism), and from the economics of Buddhism (how it is consumed and how it makes money) (Cheung 2021, 935).” Though sangha economies refer to the first of Obadia’s triad, contributors to *Monks, Money, and Morality* are also interested in the second and third categories. Specifically, they investigate how the ways in which monastics, as individuals, and monasteries, as institutions, earn money in contemporary Asia need to be reconciled with often antithetical idealized expectations of monastics and monasteries. These expectations, from both laity and monastics themselves, project a morally pristine sangha above the greed associated with either individual or institutional accumulation of wealth. Hence, the sangha must carefully pursue financial survival, or prosperity, without losing the *perception* of moral worthiness. In other words, this volume shows the complexity and diversity of contemporary Buddhists’ “balancing act” in reputation management, a vital action for Buddhist institutions found already in first century BCE Indian *stupa* inscriptions (Milligan 2019). Referring to the medieval Chinese context, Michael Walsh (2009) argues that “a large Buddhist monastery was thoroughly institutional, that is, a social and physical structure that defined, imposed, and maintained sets of social values, and sought to acquire and distribute capital—economic, cultural, or otherwise—in a competitive manner” (6). Reputation is social capital which generates economic and other forms of capital in a feedback loop to sustain Buddhist institutions.



The academic study of Buddhists and their engagement with money and capitalism is a growing area of scholarship, as shown by Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg's 2019 article in this journal. In addition to a literature overview, she mentions a host of events and initiatives from 2014–2019. Some of the conferences she lists have since had their contributors publish their presentations in a special issue on “Buddhism and Business: South and East Asian Perspectives” (in *Hualin International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 2:2 2019) and a collection of articles on “Buddhism and Economic Life in East Asia” (in *Studies in Chinese Religions* 5:2 2019). Similarly, *Monks, Money, and Morality* is the result of a 2017 academic workshop. What sets this volume apart from those special issues is the excellent coherence of the chapters. Each contributor is acutely aware of each other's work, citing and referencing other chapters not in a superficial way that may seem like an editorial garment, but engaging theoretically with other case studies and their implications for the individual author's research questions. The eleven chapters result from “long-term ethnographic field studies” and “are spread out over the entire geographical range of Buddhism in Asia: six chapters concern themselves with the Vajrayāna Buddhist sphere (in China, Mongolia, and Russia), one looks at Mahāyāna Buddhism in Japan, and four address the Theravāda tradition in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and China” (2). Four authors examine Tibetan Buddhists across China and Kashmir, India (Nicolas Sihlé, Hannah Rosa Klepeis, Martin Mills, and Jane Caple). Three investigate understudied populations of Buryat (Kristina Jonutytė), Mongolian (Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko), and non-Han-Chinese (Roger Casas) Buddhists. All ask questions regarding reciprocity, exchange, gift, circulation, transfer, redistribution, and transformation.

The chapters are grouped into four parts, starting with “Reciprocity, Money, and Trust.” Beata Świtek uses four empirically noteworthy case studies in Tokyo, Japan: 1) a priest delivery service through Amazon; 2) state taxation of a temple; 3) a temple organizing a major chanting event at a financial loss; and 4) a priest running a Buddhist bar, in order to question the significance in how donations—in which the amount given is determined by the individual—differ from economic transactions with set prices. For instance, Tokyo state officials determine legal and taxation definitions of religion “through their meticulous partitioning of the temple into taxable and nontaxable spaces” (27). Świtek analyzes the Buddhist bar owner against the context of how he and other priests understand the Pure Land doctrine of other power, and what that means when their peers enroll in the Cram School for Abbots of the Future, established by “an MBA-holding priest and a former financial advisor... [to offer] year-long courses in business strategy, marketing, leadership, public relations, and accounting to temple abbots and their families” (32). As is the case with much of the work in this volume, each of these briefly described individual case studies deserves longer chapter-length, even monograph-length studies.

In the second chapter, Thomas Borchert frames how the scrutiny of Bangkok-area Thai monks' finances is magnified due to political climate and anxiety about corruption. He provides interviews with three monks who have side incomes from teaching or translating. The monks are aware of criticism of monastic wealth circulating on Facebook and believe they are under social and political surveillance. For the third chapter, Nicolas Sihlé studies the Repkong county tantrists in Amdo Tibet who are renowned for their ritual efficacy. He offers large-scale patronage networks as the sociological unit to nuance simplistic criticisms of “ethically problematic income-oriented activity”

and points out the “complex bundle of value registers” (such as ritual efficacy and altruistic concern for sentient beings) in the long-term relationships and repeated encounters between patrons and ritualists (72). Rounding out part one, Hannah Rosa Klepeis contextualizes issues of mistrust of bad or fake monks in the Shangri-La area (formerly Zhongdian) of Yunnan province against the backdrop of China’s rapidly growing market economy. Her interlocutors’ “insistence on receiving evidence for the transaction in particular shows how proper bureaucratic procedures can be seen to mitigate the likeliness of fraud and can compensate for the lack of trust placed by the giver in the receiver” (90). This evidence or documentation is provided in the forms of official certifications and receipts verifying that large donations will be used for purposes approved by monastery abbots.

Part two of the volume, “Beyond Reciprocity,” stands in productive tension with other parts because the two chapter authors here challenge the direction of material flow and ultimately the distinction between sangha and laity as social groups, a distinction presumed by other contributors. Kristina Jonutytė argues for the lens of pooling—“socially a *within* relation, the collective action of a group”—rather than reciprocity—“a *between* relation, the action and reaction of two parties” to understand Post-Soviet Buryatia Buddhist material flows (104, emphasis in the original). She explains that the offering of a temple as gift from the sangha to the laity and the sangha’s efforts in the revival of “Buryat sheep” are “directed toward reestablishing a strong and visible presence of Buryat Buddhism in this multiethnic region” (96). This has the ideological purpose of “getting rid of Soviet heritage and reestablishing the link with the deep past,” in terms of reasserting a Buryat national-ethnic identity (100). In chapter six, Martin Mills examines the change from using barley flour and dough to using cash at the Leh Dosmoché annual rite in Ladakh, in order to argue against analytical separation between laity and sangha. Instead, he argues for communal ritual “as forms of collective work that bind laity and sangha together as a single social actor” (111). In emphasizing shared or collective karma, Mills explains that “rather than simply supporting the sangha, Buddhist lay practitioners are engaging with the sangha as *extensions of their own moral and karmic action*, an act of collective ritual work, mediated by the redistribution of wealth *within* a single group” (123, emphasis in the original). This raises questions of what counts as individual, group, or social agency.

“Managing Temples and Monasteries” is part three and consists of three chapters. Roger Casas focuses on an abbot of the Chinese ethnic minority Tai Lue in Sipsong Panna of China’s Yunnan province. The Tai abbot is affected by Han notions of masculinity and gender expectations of male leaders as high earners. Yet, he must balance this with public perception that engaging with money is morally suspect. This is in the context of local temples being the site of cockfighting, gambling, and lotteries during religious events. Clearly, moral standards are different for laity who engage in such morally tainting activities than for temple leaders. There is no moral worry for parents who offer their sons to the temple as an “investment” beyond the religious merit and “karmic benefit” accrued, as “it is clear that family prospects concerning status and economic benefits are important factors behind the ordination of a boy as novice” (134). In chapter eight, Prabhath Sirisena analyzes wealthy forest mendicants of Sri Lanka and offers autoethnographic insights—allowing for “unrestricted access to this elusive community and confront[ing] ‘the tension between insider and outsider perspectives, between social practice and social constraint’” (143). The “balancing act” of the

volume's subtitle is taken from this chapter's subtitle and describes how lay councils that facilitate distribution of money are part of intricate "processes that have been set up to enable forest monks to manage the money that they do not own" (148). He also shares vivid memories of the extremely destitute donating to him during his alms rounds (156). In a Catch-22, the more committed the monastic is to mendicant life and asceticism, the more money is donated to him (157).

In the last chapter of part three, Jane Caple situates how Post-Mao Tibetan monastic business expansions are perceived to be morally suspect in the context of more generalized monastic financing mechanisms through profit-making enterprises (161). Against popular misconceptions, Buddhist monasteries "are *obligated* to make profits in order to maintain the capital of perpetual endowments" (159, emphasis in the original). For instance, clearly defined endowments are set for specific purposes that cannot be moved and must be maintained through investments. She provides an overview of who handles money in which ways throughout different geographic areas of Asian Buddhism. In the contemporary Chinese context, monastic involvement in profit generation is perceived as greedy moral decline because of the "extreme examples of immoral profiteering and moral crisis" (168) involving incidents such as "the adulteration of infant milk formula with melamine in 2008 ...[and] mass-produced vacuum-packed spicy snacks that were reported to have made children ill" (169).

An economically minded, profit-oriented "other" is often counterposed to a moral (religious/faithful) "us." Depending on the context this "other" might be "the Chinese," Muslims, officials or entrepreneurs as a class (counterposed to ordinary folk), the people of a neighboring village—or, as we have seen, the monks of Kumbum. Although people generally aspire to greater prosperity, increasing wealth and inequalities are associated with competitiveness, dishonesty, and deception, as well as community breakdown" (165).

In response to such worries, important monastic officials "must provide an accounting of income and expenditure" to other monastics (166). However, "the public nature of this accounting to the community also places pressure on officials to excel in their work for the community," i.e., not performing effectively in profit-making, especially in comparison to peers and predecessors, would risk a reputation of being lazy.

The final part of the volume, "Capitalism, Decline, and Rebirth," begins with Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko's attention to narratives of decline and rebirth in contemporary Mongolian Buddhism. Moves to provide public accountability sometimes backfire. Abrahms-Kavunenko writes:

Some temples have lists that detail the prices of prayers and these lists are frequently criticized. While lamas explained to me that the price lists were to provide accountability for donations, for many they were evidence that, as capitalism has become a part of daily life, religious specialists were now motivated by monetary concerns rather than helping those in need (188).

Once again, in yet another context, the concern that monastics should be focused on moral endeavors rather than money making is expressed by laity and weighs on the sangha. Nevertheless, Mongolian Buddhism is also looked to as a place for rebirth and renewal after the Dalai Lama mentioned possibly being reincarnated in Mongolia, and “two separate large Maitreya statue projects in and near Ulaanbaatar that symbolize the reignition of the lamp of Buddhism after socialism” (192) are gaining attention.

Alexander Horstmann wraps up the volume with a study of “wealthy ascetics”—“widely known among the Tai-speaking ethnic groups as *khru*ba”—whom he argues are a new type of saint in the Southeast Asian Massif (196). He provides a handful of ethnographic vignettes to show:

The modern group of *khru*ba have a more flexible way of adapting to the new conditions of capitalism-consumerism and to the expectations of the followers. By designing luxurious temples (and focusing on specific temples), organizing of grand temple events (with a popular TV moderator), inventing new rituals, and creating objects of worship for sale, the modern *khru*ba have actively adapted and molded Buddhist practices to respond to the expectations of their new clientele. By combining traditional practices and modern elements of prosperity religion, the modern *khru*ba turn to existing cultural repertoires and beliefs, but invent new elements to communicate them better to the new urban middle class, such as the regular retreat, the marketing of the amulets, and the choice of the temple’s interior, such as the Buddha images, the demons, and the guardians. The temple becomes a fantasy and modern theme park, where grand things are happening (197).

Horstmann pays attention to class differences in laity captivation by these saints. “The poor hope to become rich, the middle class is attracted by mouth-to-mouth propaganda or images in the social media, and the wealthy hope to gain in prestige” (198). The aforementioned reputation management that monastics are concerned with takes the form of “a sophisticated PR campaign in different social media channels” including television, compact discs, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook (208).

In summary, *Monks, Money, and Morality* contributes rich case studies to all three overlapping areas of Buddhists’ engagement with economics as delineated by Obadia and mentioned above. It also addresses a fourth that is not highlighted by this triad: “the engine and logic at work within Buddhist uses of economic, cultural, and religious capital and how these produce each other” (Cheung 2021, 935). In other words, these case studies help to solve the religion problem in the study of economics and capitalism. Recent polycentric studies of global capitalism still take geographic regions or nation-states as their starting points while ignoring religious groups. Perhaps this is due to the flaws in Max Weber’s work, which posits monolithic religious abstract entities. However, as this volume shows, starting from wealthy ascetics and their different appeal to distinct classes in Southeast Asia, or Tokyo priests interpreting business school lessons through other power, or bureaucratic documentation of donations in Yunnan in order to counter mistrust, gives new—Buddhist and (as the third term of the title emphasizes) moral—perspectives on the justification and accumulation of various forms of capital. Some chapters are theoretically fertile and speak to broader audiences

(Klepeis, Jonutytė, Mills, Caple, Horstmann), while others more or less stay in their local context as case studies speaking mainly to specialists of a particular geographic area or one discipline of religious studies.

The volume also shows the value in studying contemporary Buddhism—i.e., the moral worries of exchange and circulation—during late capitalism in the context of related areas of Buddhist tourism (Bruntz and Schedneck 2020), Buddhist businesses (Brox and Williams-Oerberg 2020), temple management (Chan and Lang 2014), and state regulation of religion (Chang 2018). The book is accessible to undergraduates and belongs in introductory and upper-level or graduate courses on religion, Asia, anthropology, sociology, and economics.

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