



Book review

Sera Monastery

By José I. Cabezón and Penpa Dorjee. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2019, 648 pages, ISBN 9781614296119 (hardcover), \$52.95; ISBN 9781614296126 (ebook), \$34.57.

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This work by José Cabezón and Penpa Dorjee examines one of the most important Tibetan Buddhist monasteries from its founding in 1419 to its present status as an expatriate monastery in India. As one of the most important temples of the Gelug lineage, Sera monastery has played a key role in the history of Buddhism in Tibet and now in the global Buddhist cosmopolis.

While an excellent history of this influential monastery in its own right, *Sera Monastery* also provides a broader history of Buddhism in the region. In the process, the book demonstrates the value of *longue durée* historical approaches to the study of Buddhist institutions. Other reviews have given insight into the contents of the work, but here we focus more explicitly on the methodological implications of Cabezón and Dorjee's book.

It often seems that the default historiography for Buddhist studies and religious studies is an unconscious use of the nineteenth century great man theory of history. This theory has been expressed rhetorically in the paired questions: Is it the great man who molds his (sic) times? Or rather, is the great man created in response to the needs of the times? From different perspectives each is true, and focusing on one or the other is a matter of authorial selection and is not a value-free, context-neutral actuality imposed upon our understanding. More fundamentally, however, implicitly limiting our answer to one of these two options makes this a false dichotomy. In other words, if we only look at these questions, we are already constrained to think about history as a consequence of the agency of "great" individuals. Within the framework of religious studies, Buddhist studies scholarship has certainly inherited a variation of this great man theory in the form of Romantic conceptions of the creative genius, whether aesthetic or religious, or both.

The modern, popular understanding of Buddhism is defined by what Scott Mitchell has called the icon of "the Tranquil Meditator" (Mitchell 2014). While this representation is both molded by and reinforces the isolated individualism of neo-liberal ideology and neo-Romantic religiosity, it neither serves the needs of socially alienated persons in the present, nor accurately represents the intensely communal and social character of Buddhism across history. Similarly, doctrines are lifted up from the textual tradition and treated as philosophical claims. As Jonathan Silk has noted, "Understanding is possible only in context; things signify only in relation to other things. Despite this indisputable and obvious fact, far too many studies of Buddhism attempt to approach its worlds of thought and practice without regard for their institutional contexts" (Silk 2008: v). *Sera Monastery* serves as an important corrective to the focus on meditators as individual loci of Buddhism and to the tendency to focus on abstracted concepts.



In contrast to this scholarly preoccupation with the individual and abstracted domains of religious life, *Sera Monastery* looks at institutional history, focusing on questions of how Buddhism has been organized and maintained, rather than on Buddhism as a belief system or as something practiced by individuals. In other words, this book involves a methodological commitment at variance with the neoliberal presumptions that focus on particular persons. This is true not just for the great man view that history is to be written as a story of particularly influential individuals, but also for the popular imagery relating Buddhism to the isolated meditator. This book helps us to take a needed step back from that idealized imagery, and understand that even iconic hermit meditators, such as Milarepa and Bodhidharma, were dependent upon society to support their practice.

Sera Monastery reminds us that every living Buddhist today has engaged with Buddhist institutions. While there is a difference in scale between Sera Monastery and a local storefront meditation center, the workings of institutions are essential to maintaining and propagating Buddhist teachings and practices. The disruptions that have marked the modern world—wars, political transformations, economic crises, disease pandemics, and so on—highlight the contingencies that affect Buddhism, as well as how institutions work to survive radical change. There are significant similarities between the relocation of Sera from Tibet to southern India, and the establishment of Sōtō Zen branch temples in California, or a Theravādin temple in London. Such relocations first raise issues of legitimacy, authority, and authenticity in the originating culture. Next, they necessarily raise these same issues complicated by the tradition's complex transition from one religious culture to another.

Buddhist monasteries, especially large ones such as Sera, require monks to serve many different functions and to hold complex vocations. As the authors note, “Many aspects of Tibetan monastic life may seem strange to Western observers, who often have an idealized image of Tibetan monks as living a serene, contemplative existence, aloof from worldly affairs” (15). This perspective is corroborated in Dreyfus’s *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping* (2003), which is substantially grounded in the author’s personal experience living and training as a monk, and provides a complement to this view of monastic life. Another valuable historical perspective on the diversity of monastic functions is provided by Silk (2008).

Adopting the perspective of institutional history shifts our attention away from intellectual and personal conceptions of Buddhism, that is, away from Buddhism as a belief system, a collection of doctrinal texts, a quasi-psychotherapeutic system, or an identity in the pluralistic present. By contrast, institutional history involves a methodological commitment to a focus apart from the beliefs, attitudes, decisions, and actions of individuals. In one sense, of course, institutions only exist so long as there are individuals who actively create them—the “death of Pan” anthropomorphizing the end of an institution when it is no longer continually re-enacted by individual persons. But, as the actions of political and legal entities demonstrate, religious traditions have a social life of their own, continuing to exist and having effects apart from any one individual or institution. The authors demonstrate this from the very opening of the book, where we find a detailed discussion of the origins of the monastic order. The Buddha’s solutions to problems arising from communal living and mendicancy were institutionalized in the rules of the order (*vinaya*). Although individual monasteries, such as Sera, developed their own sets of rules, these build on the rules of the *vinaya* which provide the basic legitimation for monastic systems. (For a discussion of this process in Chan/Zen, see Foulk 2006: 139–40; also Yifa 2009).

We can mention three noteworthy comparable studies that focus on Buddhist institutional history. One still important study is Holmes Welch’s three volume work on modern Chinese Buddhism, particularly the first volume (Welch 1967). This study of monastic organization and practices provides insight into the institutional history of Chinese Buddhist monasteries in the first half of the twentieth century. Second,

Buswell (1992) focuses on Buddhist institutional history in modern Korea. Third, Bodiford (2008) focuses comparably on Japan. I cite these as examples of historical studies of institutions located in historically Buddhist cultural contexts. Taking into consideration diasporic and historical studies would, of course, expand this list substantially.

There is a further methodological reflection implicit in thinking about institutional history as the object of inquiry. This can be expressed in the question: what do we mean by institution? The word is suggestively ambiguous. In its verb form “to institute” it means not some physical or social object, such as a monastery, but rather to set up something—including a way of doing things, a particular kind of activity. This is the meaning of institution, for example, in John Calvin’s *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, which is not a directory of seminaries, but a catalogue of theological assertions.

An additional issue is the tendency to treat institutions as fundamentally stable entities that from time to time undergo change before returning to some new, stable form. This is the underlying assumption of the structural-functionalist theory in anthropology, but it can be an appealing way of thinking about, or talking about, institutions. Widely propagated in Buddhist teachings, the idea of impermanence provides an alternative conceptual basis, framing our historiography and languaging in terms of constant change with occasional periods of calm. This alternative is not important because it is “Buddhist,” but because it has heuristic potential for new insights into Buddhist history.

Shifting our theoretical assumption from stability as normal to change as normal is particularly important for going beyond focusing on significant events in institutional histories. The study of institutions over lengthy periods of history is a much greater challenge than historical scopes limited by particular dramatic changes. *Sera Monastery* is not only an important resource for information about a unique and important Buddhist institution, but also a model for conducting in-depth institutional histories that extend across their *longue durée*.

As an approach to understanding Buddhism in the modern era, institutional history is still a field with many unexplored opportunities. In that context, this book opens out onto the possibility of asking new questions. These include, but are not limited to, questions about the effects of institutional relocation, organizational structures and monastic functions, the ongoing role of economic and legal considerations for Buddhist institutions, changing patterns by which authority is legitimated, and what happens when institutions die.

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