



Book review

Mapping Modern Mahayana: Chinese Buddhism and Migration in the Age of Global Modernity

By Jens Reinke. Berlin: DeGruyter, 2021, xiii + 152 pages, ISBN 978-3-110-68998-3 (hardcover), \$80.99, ISBN 978-3-110-69015-6 (ebook), \$80.99.

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Mapping Modern Mahayana by Jens Reinke is an examination of the globalization of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism through a multi-sited ethnographic study of Fo Guang Shan’s 佛光山 lay arm, Buddha’s Light International Association (BLIA). Despite the organization’s prominence, Reinke’s is the first book-length treatment of Fo Guang in English since Stuart Chandler’s (2004) almost twenty years earlier. (Since the publication of *Mapping Modern Mahayana*, a third monograph, Yao and Gombrich 2022, has appeared.) Reinke’s starting point is a simple one: What accounts for BLIA’s successful global spread? Yet from this simple question emerges a sensitive and sophisticated examination of globalization, Buddhist modernism, and “Chineseness” that should significantly complicate our thinking on these issues.

Following an introduction laying out the themes and parameters of the project, chapters two and three provide essential background. Chapter two, “The Many Transnationalisms of Renjian Buddhism,” offers a genealogy of *renjian* Buddhism (Reinke chooses to leave *renjian* 人間 untranslated, rather than follow the term’s typical but problematic rendering as “Humanistic”) from its formulation in republican-era China (1911–1949) to Fo Guang Shan today. His account centers the role of transnational flows, arguing that these flows are constitutive of the movement’s modernity. Chapter three, “Migrating Bodhisattvas and Fo Guang Shan Religious Mobility,” surveys the study’s three main sites: Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles; Nan Hua Temple in Bronkhorstspuit, South Africa; and Da Jue Temple in Yixing, Jiangsu. In his discussion of the former two, Reinke highlights the complex and layered character of the diasporal communities that they serve, situating them against their particular historical development.

Chapters four to six explore three core aspects of BLIA’s project. Chapter four, “Chineseness Globalized,” examines BLIA branches as centers of culture. Reinke shows that in Los Angeles and Bronkhorstspuit, BLIA branches engage in a variety of cultural discourses and practices that create “ecumenical Chinese spaces” that appeal to internally diverse diasporas as well as culturally adjacent groups such as ethnic Vietnamese, allowing the organization to serve as a cultural ambassador to non-Chinese communities. These cosmopolitan presentations of Chinese culture contrast with the more essentialist conception held by the founder, Master Xingyun 星雲, himself. This view, however, appeals in the contemporary People’s Republic of China, and Reinke shows how the Yixing branch taps into the vogue for “traditional culture” there.



Chapter five, “Generating Global Pure Lands,” turns to education and charity. Reinke’s discussion of education offers a survey of Fo Guang’s classes, book clubs, and examinations for the laity as well as a very interesting case study of the Nan Hua Performing Arts Group, a boarding school for young women hosted at the Bronkhorstspuit temple. In his discussion of charity, he notes a shift from the civic engagement in the service of the nation that characterized *renjian* Buddhism in the Republic to a deterritorialized and globalized engagement. BLIA branches abroad engage cross-culturally with their local communities, creating new relationships between temple, diaspora, and host society.

Chapter six, “Purifying the Multitude,” focuses on religious life. In the BLIA branches’ work with diaspora communities, Reinke identifies “communality” as a key feature of Fo Guang religiosity, surveying popular communal religious activities such as repentance and highlighting unique practices that foster a distinct Fo Guang identity. This serves an important function for diasporal communities, but locals are typically interested only in meditation. Therefore, unlike cultural engagements, religious activities have developed two tracks, due to diverging visions of Buddhism.

Chapter seven, “Fo Guang Shan and Global China as a Spatial Order,” concludes by considering the book’s implications for its larger questions about the nature of globalization and the relationship of modern Buddhism to globalization. Based upon his fieldwork, Reinke characterizes globalization as a “dynamic spatial configuration or meta-order that is comprised of and constantly reproduced through complex and multifaceted border-crossing involvements of a myriad of actors—individuals, networks, organizations, nation-states, etc.—from a multitude of places, and their mutual interactions” (117). One of the constituent orders that emerges from his work is “Global China,” which he sees as helping to undermine simplistic spatial dichotomies (e.g., the Global North/South, the West and the Rest). “Global China” is an internally complex phenomenon not reducible to nation-states or ethnicity, but defined by participation in and involvement with political, cultural, and social activities tied to certain localities. It co-exists and overlaps with other spatial orders. Fo Guang Shan represents a non-Western globalization project and, in the process of that globalization, has had to negotiate varying visions of what constitutes “modern Buddhism.” Reinke argues that modern Buddhism, like modernity itself, must be seen as multiple. Fo Guang Shan represents a form that is “neither Protestant nor secular, but has managed to successfully negotiate this matrix” (123) as it has come into contact with visions—such as that of white Western converts—that are.

In my view, *Mapping Modern Mahayana* has two key virtues. The first is its empirical richness and theoretical sophistication. Reinke’s depiction of his American and South African sites is thorough and closely observed. He describes not only the religious, charitable, and educational activities of these selected BLIA branches but the triangular relationship between temple, diasporal community, and larger society. He attends to the history of the diaspora as well as changing racial and class dynamics. This wealth of description is analyzed with significant theoretical sophistication. True to his own ambitions, Reinke allows globalization to emerge from his fieldwork rather than superimposing it onto his data in the form of an external framework. The result is a clear and illuminating perspective on globalization from the point of view of ordinary women and men.

The second major virtue is an admirable insistence on multiplicity. Reinke’s book plays across his cases to reveal both patterns and particularities. Globalization is not simply the project of multinational organizations, secular or religious, but a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, “a meta-order,” that emerges from the border crossings of a multitude of actors with overlapping but distinct perspectives and projects. Likewise, he sees “Chinese” not as a single primordial property (though many of his informants do, he notes) but as a relational identity composed of associations with a set of places, symbols, discourses, and practices. This set of associations is refracted differently in different sites depending upon the particular make-up of the immigrant communities, the historical waves of immigration that produced them, their class locations, and

their relationships with the larger society. Finally, “modern Buddhism” is multiple as well. Despite the grand theorizing of some in the field who would identify a (metaphorical) global lineage or a single unifying dynamic, Reinke persuasively shows that there is more than one way for Buddhisms to be modern and these ways can, moreover, coexist within the same spaces.

In sum, *Mapping Modern Mahayana* is an outstanding work that enriches the study of Chinese religions through its focus on transnational flows, advances the study of modern Buddhism through its examination of a non-secularized, non-Protestant variant, and has something to offer to the study of transnationalism as a whole by offering a case study centered on a religious organization entwined with global China. While chapters might be incorporated into undergraduate syllabi, it will primarily be of interest to scholars and graduate students, some of whom, hopefully, will be inspired to follow in its wake.

References

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