



Book review

## The Making of American Buddhism

By Scott A. Mitchell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 264 pages, ISBN: 9780197641569 (hardcover) \$29.95.

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Histories of American Buddhism, as they are usually told, center the experiences of American Buddhists of European origin. While these studies are important for our understanding of the globalization of one of Asia's most widely spread religions, they only present one aspect of a complex and multifaceted story, a story in which the majority of actors is not of European but of Asian origin. English language works, whether academic or popular in nature, tend to mention the manifold contributions of Asian Americans to the Buddhist landscape of the US only in passing. Further, the immense internal diversity of Asian American Buddhist traditions and experiences are often conflated under a single category, such as ethnic or traditional, while Euro-American Buddhists are depicted as modern and universal. There are exceptions, of course. One recent example is Scott A. Mitchell's book *Buddhism in America: Global Religion, Local Contexts*, published in 2016. It sketches a more comprehensive picture of the Buddhist landscape in the US. In *The Making of American Buddhism*, Mitchell addresses the issue again, focusing on a US Shin Buddhist magazine, the *Berkeley Bussei* (which one might translate as "Berkeley Things" or "Berkeley Issues"), and its contributions to the mid-century American Buddhist landscape and the development of American Buddhist modernism.

The book grows out of Mitchell's graduate work on the history of the Berkeley Buddhist Temple, material from the Imamura family who headed it, and the collected works of the *Berkeley Bussei*. For a historical work, the book's structure is somewhat unconventional. Instead of presenting a linear chronology of the magazine's different phases, the book jumps back and forth in time and crisscrosses the Pacific, thereby considering its topic through a variety of lenses. This allows Mitchell to address a large number of issues, including the development of American Buddhist modernism, intergenerational dynamics in the Japanese American Buddhist community before and after the incarceration during the Second World War, more general issues of race regarding American religion, the importance of gendered labor for the development of a religious infrastructure in the US, and even contemporary political issues.

The book consists of an introduction and five main chapters, framed by a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue takes the reader right into the heart of the mid-century West Coast American Buddhist landscape. It introduces the reader to Hiroshi Kashigawi, a second generation (or *nissei*) Japanese American Buddhist, through an essay by him for the final 1956 issue of the *Berkeley Bussei*. Presenting Kashigawi's perspective, Mitchell shows what it meant to be a Japanese American Buddhist shortly after the devastating American concentration camp experience. He asks how the community was able to move forward to rebuild itself, how



Buddhism so quickly changed from being perceived as the religion of the enemy to a religious alternative for mainstream America, and what role the US Shin community had in this process.

Following the introduction, in which the author discusses his sources and lays out his theoretical framework, the first chapter provides some useful background information. It introduces the Jodo Shinshu tradition and the history of Shin missionaries to the West. The chapter also recounts the influence of orientalist scholarship on Japanese Buddhist intellectuals and reminds the reader of the importance of Buddhist periodicals in the last century. This provides useful context for understanding the cultural currents that shaped the perspectives of the authors that published in the *Berkeley Bussei*.

In the second chapter, Mitchell reviews current anglophone research perspectives on what defines Buddhist modernism. He highlights the impact of European colonialism and orientalist Buddhist scholarship which led to a focus on textual research and the association of Buddhism with rationalism. This section presents an important critique of the notion of Buddhist modernism as commonly understood in Western languages. By presenting how US Shin Buddhists took part in this discourse, Mitchell shows how the *Berkeley Bussei* complicates the oversimplifying binaries in prior US scholarship on American Buddhism that equate white Buddhism with universal modernity and Asian American Buddhists and Buddhism with foreignness, particularity, and tradition.

Chapter three discusses two issues that lie at the center of the book: post- and pre- war intergenerational Japanese American dynamics and the importance of gendered labor for the development of Buddhism in America. One role in prewar issues of the *Berkeley Bussei* was the so-called “*nissei* (second generation Japanese American) problem.” In the aftermath of the Gentleman Act and other racially exclusionary legislation, which had de facto ended Asian migration to the US, new intergenerational dynamics appeared between *issei* (first generation Japanese Americans) and their American born children. These included differences on marriage and employment, but crucially education and ethnic identity. Mitchell asks how the tradition shaped the formation of a Japanese American identity by presenting an aid to ease racial trauma caused by the camp experience and ongoing discrimination, while also serving as a link between the US and Japan.

The second part of the chapter turns to the importance of considering gender as a research lens and calls on the reader to reflect on how gendered labor has been central in constructing the broader American Buddhist infrastructure. Mitchell asks what kind of labor is valued and perceived as productive and what kind is not. He highlights the importance of the priest’s wife and her role in the temple community. He draws on the local example of Jane Imamura, showing how she was not merely a housewife, but a temple guardian, revealing her importance in creating a religious infrastructure not just for the Berkeley Buddhist Temple, but also for the broader Buddhist landscape in the US.

Chapter four dives deeper into the dynamics of creating an infrastructure that develops locally but is also connected globally through a transnational network of missionaries. Mitchell shows how the Berkeley Buddhist temple functions as an important junction within a domestic and transpacific Buddhist network. He illuminates how racial discourses shift in the US and in Japan as both countries move closer to war. He argues that understanding these discourses is central to understanding the early history of American Buddhism. Finally, the chapter highlights D.T. Suzuki’s often overlooked connection with the US Shin Buddhist community. Mitchell shows how the religious infrastructure built by US Shin Buddhists supported Suzuki during his time in the US.

Chapter five broadens Mitchell’s focus. Drawing from a wide range of disciplinary and theoretical material, Mitchell plays with the very notion of “American Buddhism” and its study. He asks what historians and Buddhist studies scholars actually *do*. What limns the boundaries of their research subjects and fields? He

reflects here, and in the epilogue, on the making of US American Buddhist studies, providing personal context on how this book came to be. He also critically reflects on the metaphor of lineage (often applied in US Buddhist studies), its usefulness and disadvantages, and on how other metaphors, such as a web, may be more inclusive, enabling us to show the importance of broader (and often overlooked) causes and conditions for the possibility of American Buddhism. The book's highlighting of the overlaps between the making of American Buddhism and the making of American Buddhist studies and relating the history of the *Berkeley Bussei* to current debates in US Buddhist circles make it relevant not just to a small audience of academic specialists, but also to Buddhist practitioners. Of particular importance among the many issues tackled by Mitchell is the ongoing neglect of the contributions of Asian American Buddhists to American Buddhism.

The book's inclusivity of such a wide range of current issues is of course a great strength. Still, looking at the material through so many different lenses and addressing such a huge variety of important issues, Mitchell leaves the reader at times wanting to learn more about one thing, while the book has already moved on to tackling something new. This sometimes takes the attention away from Mitchell's main argument: the importance of the West Coast Shin community in the development of American Buddhism. For example, Mitchell stresses the importance of transpacific networks and linkages for the development of American Buddhism. It would be interesting to know more about how Shin discourses in post-war Japan shaped and were perceived by members of the Berkeley Buddhist community. What were the commonalities, but also differences, in Shin Buddhist debates during this time? How did Japanese Shin Buddhists view developments in the US, and vice versa?

This desire for more applies not only to the topics addressed, but also to the theoretical frameworks applied. Looking at the post-war Berkeley Buddhist Shin community through so many theoretical lenses suggests many promising directions for the study of Buddhism in the US, but it occasionally also feels a little confusing. Mitchell incorporates a vast array of theoretical lenses to his material—ranging from US academic discourses on Buddhist modernism, to Adorno and the Frankfurt school, to Arif Dirlik's Marxist historiography, to mention just a few. Often this is done not by discussing the respective theories directly, but by looking at them through the lens of other research into Buddhism. It would have been beneficial for the clarity of the book's argument to have spent more time on one or two specific frameworks.

*The Making of American Buddhism* makes an important contribution to the field of American Buddhist studies, illuminating the often overlooked but central era of American Buddhism after the Second World War. At the same time, as a monograph of Japanese American Buddhists in the US, it complements and carries forward Duncan Ryūken Williams's seminal work, *American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War*, on the incarceration and survival of Japanese American Buddhists. It reveals at last the importance of Jodo Shinshu for the American Buddhist landscape, and how individuals linked to the *Berkeley Bussei*, and the issues they wrestled with, were formative for the development of US Buddhist studies.

## References

- Mitchell, Scott A. 2016 *Buddhism in America: Global Religion, Local Contexts*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Williams, Duncan Ryūken. 2019. *American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press.