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Book Review of, Figures in Buddhist Modernity in Asia

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Jeffrey Samuels, Justin Thomas McDaniel, and Mark Michael Rowe, eds.,
Figures in Buddhist Modernity in Asia

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 240 pages. Cloth, \$65.00; paperback, \$28.00. ISBN 9780824858544 (cloth); 9780824858551 (paperback).

This delightfully gritty volume contains biographical sketches of sixty-six contemporary Buddhists from East, Southeast, and South Asia. The three-page entries provide enticing windows into the complex lives and worlds of laypeople, monks, and other practitioners from a wide variety of Buddhist sects who live, work, play, teach, and learn in and between seventeen regions and countries. The ethnographically rich vignettes make vividly clear how Buddhist ordination has moved from place to place throughout history and how Buddhist practice is adapting to changing times while relying on traditions and assets from the past. Deliberately crafted to emphasize polyphonic lived experiences rather than formal Buddhist doctrine, this book provides an exciting, forward-looking counterpoint to scholarly works on the history of Buddhist thought.

In the interest of full disclosure, I confess that the concept of the book has enchanted me since I first heard about it. I, like other contributors approached by the editors, “leaped at the chance to write about the people who had influence or inspired them” (5). The collected sketches are entertaining, insightful, and as much fun to read as they were to write. I am confident that the volume will engage students and other audiences in intimate and moving ways.

In the introduction, the editors explain that they grappled with how to organize the book. Rejecting traditional formats based on region or sect, they instead chose four categories of “Looking,” to which they provide brief overviews in the text. Instructors

who focus on one particular geographical area or flavor of Buddhism will find two additional tables of contents based on more familiar classifications, one organized by Buddhist tradition and one by region and country. I concur with the editors' assertion that the chosen classification places vignettes in provocative and fruitful conversation with each other, illuminating intriguing connections between regions and sects and between laity and clergy.

In the first section of the volume, "Looking Backwards: Inventing Tradition in the Modern World," the editors have gathered biographies about individuals who seek to clarify or purify contemporary conceptions of Buddhism with reference to the (sometimes imagined) past. Included here are Khedrup Gyatso, a Tibetan monk seeking to revive Buddhist practice in the aftermath of Chinese Communist repression; Vann Nath, a Cambodian who was forced to paint propaganda for the Khmer Rouge and later created nationally-renowned images to commemorate the genocide; and Grandfather Pait, a Cambodian who spends remittances he receives from his children to make merit by rebuilding multiple temples destroyed in the war.

In the second section of the volume, "Looking Forward: Social-Psychological Care in a Troubled World," the editors present Buddhist laypeople and clergy who base their practice in both novel and tried-and-true modes of community outreach, marketing, and mental health care. Included in this section are Buddhists who have "transformed themselves into aid workers" (58), such as Kaneta Taio—who runs a mobile counseling café to support survivors of the 2011 Japanese earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster—and Taniyama Yozo—a temple priest and anthropologist who provides hospice care for the terminally ill in Japan. The editors and authors emphasize the use of modern social media in broadening and extending contemporary Buddhist practice. For example, Cide in Taiwan runs a popular website and is portrayed as "Maitreya's IT guy," and Nara, a Thai Buddhist laywoman, uses Facebook and other social media to make merit and support her friends.

In the third section, "Looking Inward: New Asceticism in Modern Buddhism," the editors gather vignettes that explore new and continuing forms of intellectual projects and contemplation. This section features artists such as Huisang, a Korean nun who teaches drawing courses and meditation from her city apartment-cum-temple, and Ani Choying Drolma, a Nepali nun who tours the world to sing songs about *dharma*. It also presents profiles of Buddhists who interact with the invisible, including Mae Sim OK, a Thai spirit medium who can make people's wishes come true. And in China, Jiang Xiuqin preaches and encourages her followers to contribute funds to print and distribute Buddhist-themed literature.

In the fourth and final section, "Looking Outward: Local Buddhists Becoming Global Citizens," the editors examine international connections in a globalizing world. For example, laywoman Ranjani de Silva was instrumental in achieving higher ordination for Sri Lankan women from Korean and Taiwanese orders of nuns, and the nun Lieu Phap has brought Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka to Vietnam. Olande Ananda is a Dutch-born monk practicing in Sri Lanka who writes and blogs in English and travels the world to teach Buddhist meditation practices. Artist Gade seeks to revive Tibetan painting practices while also placing them in conversation with contemporary symbols (such as Mickey Mouse). Samnang left a successful career as an abbot in Cambodia, married, and immigrated to New Zealand, where he assists at the local Buddhist temple and works in a poultry factory.

Figures of Buddhist Modernity in Asia emphasizes a variety of aspects of Buddhism that do not usually appear in more formal studies of the topic. For example, many of the vignettes feature laywomen and nuns. Other entries describe artists. A number of entries discuss bloggers and website designers who use social media to reach out to old and new audiences. From the compiled materials, the reader gains a clear sense of how, through their everyday practices, ordinary Buddhists simultaneously reproduce and transform their religion. In a time of extraordinary cultural dynamism, the featured “non-eminent” (IO) individuals strive to harmonize their understanding of Buddhism with emerging social practices and transnational and virtual social spaces.

This approachable volume provides a minimum of theory. It focuses instead on memorable, quirky, touching, and verbal portraits of men and women, young and old, who are global citizens rooted in complex, contemporary places. The book will appeal to scholars and students in Asian Studies, Religious Studies, and Anthropology. Its audience could also easily include general readers interested in Buddhism and Asia.

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