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Architects of Buddhist Leisure: Socially Disengaged Buddhism in Asia's Museums, Monuments, and Amusement Parks

Reviewed by Kendall Marchman

University of Georgia

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JUSTIN THOMAS McDANIEL, *Architects of Buddhist Leisure: Socially Disengaged Buddhism in Asia's Museums, Monuments, and Amusement Parks*. Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. XIV, 224 pp. CAN \$36.64 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8248-7675-3

Justin Thomas McDaniel recounts how a lovely day spent with his family at a Seoul monastery led to the creation of the book. His daughter's laughter led him to the realization that scholars have too often ignored the aspect of leisure when studying public religious spaces. In the chapters that follow, McDaniel provides case studies from Buddhist leisure sites around the globe—Nepal, Thailand, the University of Pennsylvania, Singapore, Louisiana, to name a few—to demonstrate how the framework of leisure helps us to think about religion. McDaniel produces a compelling model for subsequent research on the topic of religion in public space. For that reason, graduate faculty advisors and instructors should consider adding *Architects of Buddhist Leisure* to their reading lists and seminars.

McDaniel highlights three arguments that are applicable to studies of contemporary religion. First, a focus on public religious cultures inevitably leads to the breaking down of the binary of the secular and the religious. The sites are most often owned, built, operated, and visited by laity, and visitors are not obligated to interact in a particular way. McDaniel explains, "There is no particular way of performing or participating in Buddhist leisure" (5). He later clarifies that, when considering leisure and Buddhism, scholars often target retreats and guided meditations, but he views leisure as idleness that has no specific purpose, beyond sight-seeing or passing the time. Therefore, many public Buddhist spaces throughout Asia construct marvels—colossal statues, (not too) disturbing hellscape, beautiful gardens—to attract and appease visitors who, perhaps, just want

to get away for a bit. These sites allow for what McDaniel coins as “socially disengaged Buddhism” (14).

The blurring of the secular and religious is evident throughout the examples provided in the book’s three chapters, but is especially memorable in the first chapter, in which McDaniel chronicles the ongoing saga of the Lumbini Sacred Garden in Nepal. UNESCO conceived of the park as a monument to the birthplace of the Buddha. An esteemed Japanese architect, Kenzo Tange, was commissioned to design the project. Despite beginning in 1978, however, Tange’s vision remains incomplete. Significant progress has been made and though some parts of the park are essentially defunct, other parts receive visitors. Instead of attracting the international crowds that the designers originally envisioned, the park is a recreation area for locals who are drawn to the park because there is not much else to do around town. McDaniel recalls that the locals—Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike—visit the park “because it is a rare, open and public space where they can have picnics, stroll freely (often away from their parents and grandparents), eat free meals at different monasteries, watch tourists or foreign Buddhist monks and nuns in strange clothes, flirt, and most importantly, pose in front of large and foreign pieces of architecture . . .” (70). UNESCO, a secular organization, and Tange, a secular architect, originally envisioned the park as a “Sacred Garden;” instead, it became a place for leisure where there are no clear boundaries separating religious and secular behaviours, and no particular responsibilities for visitors, other than to enjoy the park as they see fit.

In his second argument, McDaniel posits that trends observed at these Buddhist sites are relevant in areas of research beyond Buddhist studies. One of the most consistent themes in McDaniel’s research is that the sites present an ecumenical form of Buddhism, which is not exclusive to any particular type of Buddhism; in other words, they make no effort to proselytize. Consequently, they rarely demonstrate a concern for authenticity or promote any one way of being Buddhist, which makes

them nearly impossible to label (even calling them “Buddhist” leisure sites can be a stretch in some cases).

McDaniel emphasizes the lack of attention for authenticity by profiling Lek Wiriaphan, an eccentric Sino-Thai business owner, who built three Buddhist amusement parks to display his collection of Buddhist artifacts. Lek, his wife and his business partner, Braphai, often blended secular Thai cultural artifacts alongside Buddhist (and Hindu) artifacts from entirely different cultures. They viewed the parks as “a place to visit and ease the mind and the heart” (90). McDaniel also highlights several other sites that are there for the simple pleasure of visitors. For example, visitors are not expected to have a mystical or emotional experience of a particular Buddhist narrative or meaningful encounter. Instead, visitors let go of their mundane worries and allow themselves to be distracted by the strange and wonderful sights.

McDaniel’s final argument points out that the specific visions for these sites rarely, if ever, appear exactly as planned. Each chapter focuses on a particular public religious site and the architects who developed them: the first chapter looks at monuments and memorials, the second covers a variety of public parks, and the last chapter considers museums and curio cabinets. McDaniel demonstrates that these sites are “complex adaptive systems changed and influenced by visitors, budgets, materials, and local and global economic conditions” (6). His reason for profiling the architects is not to praise any particular individual, but to highlight their failures connected to external events and compromises that altered their initial vision. Nevertheless, in each case he demonstrates that the laity are the producers and “drivers of Buddhism,” which give scholars new ways of thinking about religion (26). This point is apparent in the case of the Lumbini Sacred Garden mentioned above. McDaniel draws from Tange’s theory of “metabolism” to explain the process by which the locals constructed a favorite hangout spot from the failed remains of an internationally designed sacred monument.

McDaniel saves one of the most intriguing (and humorous) profiles in the book for the opening of the final chapter, where he introduces Maxwell Sommerville, a wealthy nineteenth-century American. Sommerville amassed such an outstanding collection of Asian and Buddhist antiquities that the University of Pennsylvania made him a faculty member in exchange for displaying the objects in their museum. Despite the university's hope that these pieces would help legitimize their museum, Sommerville envisioned the exhibit as his own Buddhist temple. McDaniel's fieldwork in Asia notes how contemporary "temples" are following Sommerville's erasure of the lines between temple, museum, and cultural center, in order to attract more visitors.

Despite the relatively short length of the book—McDaniel concedes in the Introduction that he purposefully kept the work brief to encourage future study—it is replete with points that scholars will find warrants further discussion. For instance, McDaniel's definition of leisure in this project as "purposeless or non-teleological action" (15) deserves more attention. Although McDaniel is careful in explaining his use of the term "leisure," he concedes that certain interpretations might be problematic. While religious practice does not always qualify as leisure, certainly some people attend formal religious institutions and events to pass the time, socialize, or simply because there is nothing better to do. Furthermore, if these Buddhist places of public leisure have no agenda or connection to formal Buddhist institutions, what makes them Buddhist and qualifies the activities there as "Buddhist leisure?" Might the restaurant down the street with a large Maitreya in the entryway be a Buddhist restaurant? In response, McDaniel may point out that both of these concerns demonstrate the blurring of the supposed boundary between the religious and the secular.

In his concluding remarks, McDaniel brilliantly notes that Western distortions of Buddhism in the pursuit of leisure have been labeled as

Orientalism, but his research establishes that the same thing has happened in Asia over the last century (165). He posits a link between leisure and Buddhist material culture, and urges further study of how Buddhist material culture may be applicable to other disciplines. This is a noteworthy claim to consider, and it will be compelling to see the work of scholars who take up his charge.

Architects of Buddhist Leisure is the first contribution to the new “Contemporary Buddhism” series from the University of Hawai’i Press, and if it is any indication of the quality we can expect from the rest of this series, Buddhist studies scholars should keep an eye out for future offerings. Until then, McDaniel has given the field a lot to consider.