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Educating Monks: Minority Buddhism on China's Southwest Border

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THOMAS A. BORCHERT, *Educating Monks: Minority Buddhism on China's Southwest Border*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. XVIII, 211 pp. CAN \$96.54 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8248-6648-8

In this innovative ethnography of monastic education among the Dai-lue, an ethnic minority that practices Theravada Buddhism near China's Southwest border, Thomas Borchert begins with a chance encounter in the spring of 2010 at the Buddhist College of Singapore (BCS). While giving a lecture on Theravada Buddhism in Sipsongpanna—the primary residence of the Dai-lue—Borchert met a Dai-lue Buddhist monk from the region who was studying Buddhism as a Chinese monk wearing Chinese robes at BCS. Fast forward to 2011, Borchert saw the monk again in Sipsongpanna and learned that he had left BCS to take a break from his study. Since then, the monk has disrobed and worked for a cross-border trading company (175). Borchert's encounter with the Dai-lue monk in Singapore and the monk's eventual decision to disrobe highlight the complexity of Borchert's core ethnographic question in the book: "What makes a Buddhist monk?" (1). *Educating Monks* draws extensively from Borchert's fieldwork based at Wat Pajie—the central temple in Jing Hong City that houses the Sipsongpanna Buddhist Association (SBA) and also where Borchert worked as an English teacher for novices for fifteen months from 2001-2002. His fieldwork involved multiple conversations and interviews with monks, novices, and laity in various parts of China and Southeast Asia over the span of almost 20 years (1994-2014). The book is recommended to both undergraduate and graduate students, as well as academics of Buddhist Studies, especially those specializing in anthropological framework, as it offers a detailed, sophisticated, and multi-scalar examination of how Buddhist monks live and how they are educated in the socio-political landscape of the early twenty-first century.

Borchert's investigation of monastic education in Sipsongpanna advances two critical theoretical conversations in the field of Buddhist studies. First, he proposes that in order to understand contemporary Buddhist communities and education, scholars should take into account all three frameworks of the local, national, and transnational (5). Compared to previous works on Buddhist monastic culture and education that tend to focus primarily on one of the three frameworks, Borchert interweaves all three in his analysis and sheds light on how the lifeworld and education of Buddhist monastics in Sipsongpanna are afforded, but also limited and conditioned, by local concerns, national governance structure, and transnational flows and frictions.

This leads to the author's second concern: the relationship between Buddhism/Buddhist education and the state, particularly in the context of China. Borchert challenges two tendencies in scholarship on religion in China: scholars either pay much attention to the state's control and regulation of religion or document the revival efforts of religious communities in post-Mao China without taking into account the state's involvement in such efforts.¹ While the Chinese state establishes the institutional field in which Buddhist institutions in Sipsongpanna operate, it "does not control every action" and the practice of religion is "not always affected by politics" (54-55). Borchert argues that the relationship between the state and Buddhism is a matter of constant negotiation and management among various stakeholders, including Buddhist monastics, local and national government agencies, laity, and other transnational connections. Buddhist monks in Sipsongpanna then "constantly face the world in multiple frames of conceptualizations," of which the state is only a part (175).

¹ Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, "The Politics of a Reviving Buddhist Temple: State, Association and Religion in Southeast China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 65.2 (2006): 337-60.

As such, research on Buddhist education, Borchert contends, should refrain from the dominant assumptions that the state determines the course and result of Buddhist education, and that Buddhist education, often deemed circumscribed by national boundaries, mainly serves the political agendas of the nation-state. Building on recent scholarship that reassesses the impact of state agendas and institutional reforms on Buddhist monastic education,² Borchert reorients the study of Buddhist education by taking the following considerations into account: the diversity of educational contexts (local, national, and transnational), the goals and purposes that Buddhist actors attribute to monastic education, and the ways in which different educational contexts are connected and situated in different socio-political regimes that enable and limit the pursuit of monastic education (8-9).

Educating Monks is divided into six chapters. Chapters 1-3 provide an examination of Buddhism in Sipsongpanna through a discussion of its institutional organization, the negotiation of the Buddhist institutions with the Chinese state governance of religion and ethnic minority, and the networks of Dai-lue monks. Since the 1980s, the region of Sipsongpanna witnessed a revival of Buddhism following the closure of many Buddhist temples during the Cultural Revolution. This revival relied not only on the efforts of the local communities, but also the support from the sanghas of mainland Southeast Asia and the Chinese government (37). While Buddhists from Thailand and the Shan States in Myanmar/Burma have provided books, images, and money, and have assigned monks to serve as Dharma teachers and abbots at local villages, the Chinese government has taken great interest in preserving Dai-lue culture and Buddhism for the purpose of domestic tourism (37; 65). From the perspective of the Chinese state, Buddhism in Sipsongpanna, on the

² Justin McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

one hand, fits with the state discourse of “normal religion,” considered as more legitimate and less concerning than an “evil cult,” such as Falun Gong and, on the other hand, it can effectively contribute to state economic development projects by generating tourism revenue for the region. For example, Wat Pajie, the central temple where the SBA is located, while remaining independent of it, has been incorporated into the tourist park complex and has become a central location for tourist visits, particularly during the spring holiday in May and the Water-Splashing Festival in mid-April (130-131). Borchert argues that these conditions have allowed Dai-lue monks to cultivate good *guanxi* (relationship networks) with the government and to advance Buddhist projects, such as temple building and education (70).

It is important to note that in most of the ethnographic accounts in these three chapters, that the “state” with which the SBA interacts most frequently is comprised of the local Public Security Bureau (PSB), and the Minority and Religious Affairs Bureau (MRAB). Monks at the SBA generally have a good relationship with both of these institutions; the officer responsible for Buddhism in the MRAB in fact used to teach Chinese at Wat Pajie and had continued his support for the Buddhist institutions (68-69). As Borchert points out, the relationship between the Chinese state and Sipsongpanna Theravada Buddhism does not follow the “galactic polities”³ model of Theravada Thailand, Burma, or Sri Lanka where Buddhism is central to the legitimation of the state. The emphasis in China is rather on “proper social actions [on the part of the Buddhist institutions] and social stability, embedded in discourses of the nation” (77). This also means that, Borchert contends, in ensuring that religion remains outside of the political sphere, the state is just as “likely to ignore the ways that monks and other religious actors behave politically,

³ Stanley Tambiah, *World Conqueror, World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against an Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

as long as their actions remain outside of the institution of power” (78).⁴ Borchert demonstrates this by recounting the case of the “false monks” in Chapter 2, that is, a group of Han Chinese from outside of Yunnan Province who dressed up as Theravada and Mahayana monks, and who charged large sums of money for fortune-telling. Despite the continuous efforts of the monks from the SBA to report the false monks to the PSB, the Bureau failed to take action. Only after tourists began complaining about the situation did the PSB step in to resolve the issue.

In examining the institutional field of Buddhism in Sipsongpanna, Borchert highlights the various networks through which Buddhist monks of the region travel locally in China and around Southeast Asia. Drawing on Charles Kurtzman’s conception of Muslim networks where networks represent “human relations as a structure of nodes connected by spokes” (2005, 69),⁵ Borchert shows how each of the three networks of Buddhist monks in Sipsongpanna, namely the local, the national, and the transnational, are constituted by certain spokes, that is, the relations that connect actors and institutions. While the local network is built on the economies of merit, centered around the oldest and best-educated monks in the region, and on the search for abbots in village *wats*, the national network is constituted by the participation of Sipsongpanna Buddhist monks in the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) and the *minzu* policy of the Chinese government that connects the Dai-lue with other ethnic minorities (83-92). The transnational network builds on the economies of merit, the educational travel of Dai-lue monks to Southeast Asia, the kinship network of Dai-lue laypeople, and the pilgrims and

⁴ For a comparable formulation of state-religion relation, see: Robert P. Weller, “The Politics of Increasing Religious Diversity in China,” *Daedalus* 143.2 (April 2014): 135-44.

⁵ Charles Kurtzman, “The Network Metaphor and the Mosque Network in Iran 1978-1979,” in *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop*, eds. Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 69-83.

tourists from Thailand to Sipsongpanna (95-96). Borchert argues that these networks are sustained and facilitated by the different “ethnoscapes” in which Dai-lue monks are embedded, including ethnicity, citizenship and nationality, and in Buddhism, both in its general and Theravada forms (100). And while these different ethnoscaes afford Dai-lue monks remarkable flexibility in their movement, the frictions among them—regulations about passport, visa, and religious sponsorship for border crossing, for example—might also pose limitations and challenges to their movements.

These different Buddhist networks and ethnoscaes bear crucial implications for monastic education in Sipsongpanna. Chapters 4-6 examine the different contexts of and the impacts that local, national, and transnational politics have on Buddhist monastic education. Drawing on Anne Blackburn’s approach to monastic education in Sri Lanka (2001),⁶ Borchert identifies two forms of monastic education in Sipsongpanna: the apprentice and the curricular education. Apprentice education takes place in the informal settings of village *wats*, which emphasize the embodied practice of learning how to behave like a proper monk, and which aims to train boys with the skills and knowledge pertinent to the concerns of the local communities (116). This mode of education is not standardized by a central sangha hierarchy or government, but rather, it is conditioned by knowledge of the nearby monks and regional patterns of textual and ritual knowledge (112). Buddhist curricular education, on the contrary, puts forth both a formal standardized three-year curriculum, *nak-tham*, that is borrowed and adapted from Thailand, and an informal Dai-lue cultural curriculum, which occurs in the classrooms at the Dhamma school at Wat Pajie and Wat Long Leung Lue (where the SBA is located). These forms of education help to produce intellectual

⁶ Anne Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

monastics who protect and promote Buddhism as an essential component of being Dai-lue (150). In explicating these two modes of education, Borchert is careful in noting that the expected outcomes of monastic education is never guaranteed: other factors in the individual lives of novices, such as family problems, structural obstacles associated with being a minority in China, and a lack of personal interests and ambitions, may interrupt their monastic education and lead to their decision to disrobe (175-176).

In both forms of monastic education, Dai-lue monks have to negotiate with the Chinese state's compulsory education policy that requires all novices to attend public schools and to finish at least junior high school. For young novices participating in apprentice education at local *wats*, their time is split between learning Dai-lue language, Buddhism and the formal curriculum at public schools, resulting in some novices having difficulties succeeding at learning both (121). For those at the Dhamma school, they have to learn both the *nak-tham* curriculum and the state curriculum taught by teachers from the technical college in Jing Hong. In learning the state curriculum, Dai-lue novices have encountered a series of what Chih-Yu Shih refers to as "China moments" (2002),⁷ that is, those moments "when a minority subject must comply with a demand of the Chinese state and is confronted with being a minority" (123). These moments have occurred when Dai-lue novices learned about Chinese ethnic minorities in textbooks and through teachers, which reinforced the idea that the Dai-lue is still "backward" (123). From both of these forms of education, Dai-lue Buddhist novices have learned that they are Chinese citizens and therefore, are part of the geo-body. At the same time, they have become aware that they are different from Han Chinese and also from Chinese Mahāyāna monastics,

⁷ Chih-Yu Shih, *Negotiating Ethnicity in China: Citizenship as a Response to the State* (London: Routledge, 2002).

whom they see more as a financial resource to help with the development of Dai-lue monastic education (92).

As Borchert observes, the need to negotiate with the Chinese state about its policy on education does not mean that the state completely determines the course of monastic education in Sipsongpanna. Dai-lue monks have the autonomy at the Dhamma school to construct curriculum on Buddhism and Dai-lue culture. However, the choice to follow the compulsory educational policy and to incorporate state curriculum is taken partially to ensure that young novices have the necessary preparation to participate in the Chinese economy, even if this choice means that the autonomy of the monks in controlling the Dhamma school becomes more limited (147).

Beyond the Dhamma school in Sipsongpanna, novices tend to pursue further studies either at the Buddhist institutes of the PRC or at other Dhamma schools of Thailand. Dai-lue monastics can travel on their own through state channels, and by routes and connections previously made by monastics in their lineage or *wats*. As Borchert observes, while Dai-lue novices are embedded in different ethnoscares, which include ethnicity, citizenship, nationality, and Buddhism, these ethnoscares facilitate much flexibility for them to travel across borders. At the same time, new frictions and challenges are engendered as novices move from one socio-political structure to another (171). In Thailand, for example, Dai-lue monks might be able to pass as Thai nationals, but there are many cases where the increasingly stringent Thai immigration laws reinforce the distinctions between Dai-lue and Thai monks and prevent Dai-lue monks from becoming a part of the Thai Buddhist establishment. Despite the fact that Buddhism provides a core mode of transnational belonging and enables movement, as Borchert astutely observes, it “remains a weak force,” and the different modes of affiliation “do not create

a cosmopolitan identity, but enable, at best, cosmopolitan practices” (23).

In *Educating Monks*, Borchert provides readers with vivid ethnographic accounts and astute analyses of the multilayered dynamics of monastic education in China’s Southwest Border and beyond. The book is carefully researched and well-written, and Borchert’s long-term intensive fieldwork and his intimate familiarity with the lifeworld of Buddhist monks from Sipsongpanna deeply enrich our understanding of the opportunities and challenges of monkhood in the early twenty-first century. While comprehensive, the book does not explicate fully the gender aspect in Buddhism and Buddhist education in Sipsongpanna. Since Buddhism in Sipsongpanna does not have a nun lineage, Borchert focuses primarily on monks and male novices. However, certain gender dynamics between the male novices and lay female students in public schools are mentioned. Borchert recounts how some villagers were, in the past, concerned about lay female students’ standing and sitting on the second story of the school building, potentially over the head of younger male novices. Concerns were also raised when, as Mette Hansen (1999)⁸ shows, senior high school female students dismissed boys who had been novices as potential mates (123-125). These observations raise questions concerning how gender and gender dynamics are constructed among the Dai-lue, particularly how gender is talked about and taught in monastic education. How are masculinity and femininity articulated and reinforced in both monastic apprentice and curricular education? Which genealogies of gender ideology do Buddhist teachers incorporate in the teaching? How might this have an impact on the novices’ conception of romance and family life, and in some cases, should they decide to disrobe and get married? And ultimately, how would a discussion of gender in-

⁸ Mette Halskov Hansen, *Lessons in Being Chinese: Minority Education and Ethnic Identity in Southwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

form the analysis of the interaction and frictions between different forms of affiliation in the book? The question of gender aside, *Educating Monks* provides readers an innovative multi-scalar theoretical and methodological framework to gain an understanding of how monastic training is shaped by the interactions and frictions of various socio-political forces. It proves an essential read for anyone interested in Buddhist education in the twenty-first century.