

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 16, 2021

Charismatic Monks of Lanna Buddhism

Reviewed by Olivia Porter

King's College London

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: olivia.c.porter@kcl.ac.uk.

PAUL T. COHEN, ed., *Charismatic Monks of Lanna Buddhism*. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2017. XIII, 266 pp. CAN \$33.95 (pb). ISBN 978-8-77694-195-6

Charismatic Monks of Lanna Buddhism aims to explore the distinctive characteristics of Lanna Theravada Buddhism through the tradition of charismatic holy men known as *ton bun* (“person of merit” or “holy person”). Born from a conference panel and subsequent seminar, this volume consists of eight chapters from eight contributors along with an introduction by the editor Paul T. Cohen. This collection of essays is a wonderful introduction to Lanna Buddhism, a tradition that has been overlooked in the field of Theravada studies until now. Lanna Buddhism emerged in the fourteenth century and centered around Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, and its surrounding areas in Myanmar, Laos, and China. The chapters in this volume illuminate how the practice of Lanna Buddhism spans across these borders and among different ethnic groups including non-Tai minorities. Therefore, as well as being a valuable primer to the Lanna Buddhist tradition, *Charismatic Monks* is also of great value to those interested in regional Northern Thai, Shan, Isan, Karen, Dara’ang, and Lahu Buddhism.

Charismatic Monks seeks to explore the relationship between Lanna charismatic monks and their followers through the Thai Buddhist concept of *barami* (Pali: *pāramī*). These charismatic *ton bun* monks are thought to possess *barami*, an exceptional personal quality relating to the ten *parami* or “perfections” leading to Buddhahood. In the Introduction, Cohen ar-

gues that the concept of *barami*, as it is understood in Lanna Buddhist cosmology, is reflective of Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority, which is defined as a quality of an individual personality that sets them apart from ordinary men by virtue of their exceptional powers or qualities (1). In this volume the concept of *barami* is explored through Khruba Siwichai, a renowned *ton bun* monk, and other *khruba* monks from his lineage. The term *khruba* means "venerated teacher" and is "conferred upon monks, usually of advanced age, who are highly venerated for their holiness and personal charisma."¹ *Ton bun* monks are a specific type of *khruba*, distinguished by their more austere religious practices and extraordinary charisma based on the accumulation of merit (*bun*) and perfection (*barami*) over their past lives (8). *Barami* is glossed as a quality of *ton bun* monks, related to a wide range of attributes such as moral rectitude and knowledge, skills in architecture, building and construction, and knowledge of traditional Lanna texts, the precise nature of *barami* remains elusive. Justin McDaniel has commented on the conflation of *barami* with charisma in his review of *Charismatic Monks* for the Journal of Asian Studies, arguing that the two words are not equivalent and not enough has been done to interrogate the meaning and use of each term.² Whilst this is a valid concern that does deserve more attention, the book still serves as an important addition to literature concerning Buddhist practice that has not been widely written about.

In the first chapter, Katherine A. Bowie introduces Khruba Siwichai, one of the most famous charismatic monks in Northern Thailand. A number of the other *ton bun* monks examined in this volume are

¹ See Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah's *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (*Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology*) (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 295.

² See Justin McDaniel's "Charismatic Monks of Lanna Buddhism," in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 77, no. 1(2018): 283–88.

thought to be reincarnations of this eminent Khruba who was responsible for the restoration and construction of over a hundred northern temples during the 1920s and 1930s. Bowie details the popularity of Khruba Siwichai in Northern Thailand and the controversies associated with his religious movement which resulted in him being put under temple arrest and being called to Bangkok for investigation a number of times. Khruba Siwichai's clashes with the Bangkok Thammayut Order reveal the changing relationships between the state, society, and sangha during the period. Bowie explores how Khruba Siwichai's refusal to adhere to secular orders and his continued propagation of Lanna Buddhism was reflective of the northern Thai tradition of political independence and resistance to central authority. The Lanna tradition remained distinctly separate until 1936, when Siwichai agreed to abide by the national sangha regulations and the Northern sangha was absorbed into the Siamese sangha.

In the second chapter, Paul Cohen offers a comparison between Khruba Siwichai's Lanna Buddhist tradition, and the reformist and purist tradition of Achan Man of Northeastern Thailand (Isan). Cohen provides useful context to the previous chapter through a short biography of Khruba Siwichai, as well as a biography of Achan Man. In this chapter, themes of resistance to central authority are explored as Cohen highlights how Khruba Siwichai's success in money-raising and building projects paired with his advocacy of traditional Lanna Buddhism. This subsequently resulted in him emerging as a charismatic symbol of Northern Thai ethno-regionalism. In contrast, Achan Man, a *dhutanga* forest monk from Northeastern Thailand is credited as playing a key role in the spread of Thammayut influence and the expansion of central Thai authority in the region. Cohen explores similarities between the two monks, most notably their shared adherence to *dhutanga* practices. However, Achan Man's lineage placed more emphasis on the practice of *phra tudon kammathan*, which is wandering for the sole purpose of intensive meditation.

Khruba Siwichai's *ton bun* tradition diverges from the *Kammathan* tradition of Achan Man in their attitudes towards building religious monuments. A distinctive feature of the *ton bun* tradition is the emphasis on the Utopian ideal of establishing religious buildings and monuments in preparation for the advent of the future Buddha, Ariya Metteya. In contrast, Achan Man was averse to being involved in monastic construction projects and distanced himself as a charismatic figure in lay moral communities. In his exploration of two prominent monastic figures, Cohen comments on the increasing influence of the central state in terms of sangha authority as well as urban patronage from the wealthy Bangkok elite.

In the third chapter, "Partners in Protection: *Khrubas*, Construction, and *Khu Barami* in Chiang Rai, Thailand," Anthony Lovenheim Irwin explores a memorial-shrine dedicated to two monks, Khruba Kham La and Khruba Intha, who are linked to one another through a relationship based on *barami*. The engagement of these monks in widespread building campaigns is described as a paradoxical combination of both self-sacrifice and material production, thought to be the ultimate combination for the cultivation of *barami*. Lovenheim also explores the role of *barami* in the actual construction of religious buildings, highlighting the differences between king-led Buddhist building projects and *ton bun*-led building projects. King-led building projects traditionally depended on *corvée* and conscripted labour, whilst *ton bun*-led projects depend on a labour force of faithful volunteers. These volunteers are called *sattha* in Thai (Pali: *saddha*) and it is thought that a *khruba*'s ability to attract *sattha* is linked to his *barami* (95). Through this thoughtful case study, Irwin examines the centrality of religious construction projects to both the monastic and lay community in the practice of northern Thai Buddhism and sheds light on the qualities that are attributed to a *khruba*'s *barami*.

Next, Mikael Gravers' chapter discusses themes of Buddhist Utopia building in a case study of the Buddhist temple settlement of Wat Phra Bat

Huai Tom, a Karen community established in 1970 by a northern Thai monk, Khruba Wong, in Lamphun Province, Northern Thailand. Gravers explores the relationship between the communal moral values of the Huai Tom community, and secular values in a modernizing project that incorporates Lanna Buddhist cosmology and rituals with traditional Karen customs into a modern and globalized context. Gravers argues that notions of *lokiya* (the mundane and material world) and *lokuttara* (the spiritual and supra-mundane world) are combined into a singular community in Huai Tom, with the ultimate goal of the community's encounter with the future Buddha. Graver produces a fascinating vignette of the Huai Tom community which, under the leadership of Khruba Wong, constructed their own fitting narrative to situate themselves within the Buddhist chronicles (*tamnan*).

In the fifth chapter "A Karen Charismatic Monk and Connectivity across the Thai-Myanmar Borderland," Kwanchewan Buadaeng introduces U Thuzana, a renowned border-crossing Karen monk known for his popularity across the Myanmar and Thai border. Buadaeng cites Gravers' work on charismatic border-crossing monks, adding that U Thuzana's followers from different ethnic backgrounds, classes, and status levels support him for different reasons. Buadaeng also draws on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage, arguing that the cross-border religious movement headed by U Thuzana is an assemblage that has the nature of multiplicity. For instance, this assemblage consists of three main groups: Karen followers of the late Khruba Siwichai and his lineage, Karen migrant workers from Myanmar living in Thailand, and rich upper-middle class business people who provide U Thuzana with financial support. Buadaeng argues that followers from these three groups are motivated by different aspects of U Thuzana's vision, which includes the following: 1) the Buddhist cosmological imaginary, 2) the Karen tradition, and 3) modernization and development. The Buddhist cosmological imaginary relates to U Thuzana's idea of rebuilding a Buddha-land, which is connected to the

broader *khru*ba ideal of constructing a Buddhist Utopia with religious buildings and monuments. In the case laid out by Buadaeng, U thazana's propagation of Karen traditions refers to the visitation of Karen migrant communities in central Thailand and the conducting of rituals. Through wrist-tying rituals called "*ki chue la khu*," for instance, such events are an opportunity for Karen migrants to maintain, and to express their Karen traditions and cultural identity. Lastly, the vision of modernization and development relate to the sponsored large-scale construction projects that provide labour opportunities for Karen people, which also result in a cross-border network of both religious buildings and communities. Through these networks, U Thuzana has been able to construct temples and pagodas in both Myanmar and Thailand, linking communities through building projects that attract Karen volunteer labour and central Thai wealthy donors. The collaborative work of these communities reflects the ever changing socio-economic and political contemporary context.

Sean Ashley focuses on the relationship between Khruba Chao Thueang Natasilo, a modern *ton bun* monk, and the Silver Palaung, Dara'ang communities in Northern Thailand. Characteristic of *ton bun* monks, Khruba Thueang is involved in the building and restoration of religious buildings and follows the ascetic practices of Khruba Siwichai, which includes the observances of a vegetarian diet, one meal per day, and sleeping for a limited amount of time. Ashley's ethnographic account of Dara'ang villagers in Chiang Dao District reveals the social and political dynamics within the community since the Dara'ang villagers' first encounter with Khruba Thueang in 1995. This was a period of incredible social strain as most of the community had recently fled from Shan State in Myanmar in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the community's members were new migrants to Thailand. The Dara'ang migrants were labelled as *chao khao* or "hill tribe" people by the central Thai government, a term

used to describe non-Tai people in the uplands, making it extremely difficult for Dara'ang migrants to claim citizenship or land rights. The Dara'ang clashed with the central Thai state which framed them as being involved in drug trafficking and deforestation. It was during this tumultuous period that Khruba Thueang began working with the Dara'ang and establishing a Buddhist community through organizing festivals, ordaining Dara'ang boys, and constructing religious buildings. Ashley notes that these building projects are funded by middle- and upper-class supporters from Bangkok who are disillusioned by the culture of urban monasteries, and who look to peripheral areas of the country for more "authentic" holy men. This is a theme that appears consistently throughout the chapters in this volume, highlighting the changing relationship between the communities in the urban centre and rural peripheries, as well as contemporary attitudes towards the centralized Thai *sangha*.

In the seventh chapter, "The Holy Man of the Twenty-First Century and His Transnational and Diverse Community of Faith," Amporn Jirattikorn examines Khruba Bunchum, a contemporary Buddhist monk who has garnered international attention as a result of his involvement with the Tham Luang cave rescue mission in Chiang Rai Province in 2018, when twelve young Thai boys and their football coach found themselves trapped inside a cave complex for eighteen days. Khruba Bunchum is a Thai monk who spent two decades in Myanmar, but was forced into exile when the military junta in Myanmar became worried about his popularity among ethnic minorities in the region. Khruba Bunchum settled in Thailand but his engagement in transborder activities means that he has a following that spans national borders and spans ethnic communities. In this chapter Jirattikorn explores two main questions, as follows: First, how has a monk ordained in Thailand, and still officially a member of the Thai *sangha*, gained so much respect among ethnic minority groups in Myanmar? And second, how do these diverse groups of followers engage in worshipping him? Jirattikorn explores the popularity of Khruba Bunchum as

a charismatic monk through Appadurai's concept of the work of imagination, which is used to understand the ways in which people make meanings out of religious symbols. For example, when images of Khruba Bunchum are released on social media, they are no longer bound to local, national, or regional spaces, and they are free to be re-imagined and re-defined by groups across all manner of boundaries. Subsequently, Bunchum's social media images became symbols with religious meaning and significance. Through exploring the activities of Khruba Bunchum, Jirattikorn comments on the role of *ton bun* holy men in the refiguration of the sacred across social, political, and national lines.

The final chapter by Tatsuki Kataoka also centers on Khruba Bunchum but it focuses on his popularity among the Lahu, a Tibeto-Burman group who inhabit China, Myanmar, Thailand, and the bordering countries. Kataoka draws on the theme of the multi-ethnic nature of the *ton bun* movement, highlighting that previous discussions of Bunchum focused on Tai-speaking groups. Kataoka emphasizes that it is also important to note Bunchum's popularity among non-Tai speaking highlanders who are typically regarded as non-Buddhist. Khruba Bunchum is known for spending long periods of time in solitary meditation and he is known to enlist highlanders for assistance in finding caves suitable for these meditation retreats and as a result, these communities became followers of Khruba Bunchum. Kataoka explores how Bunchum has established Buddhist communities in regions that are not traditionally Buddhist, in a way that bypasses institutionalized Buddhism. Most notably, Bunchum's new headquarters in Thailand is technically a pagoda rather than a temple, since pagodas do not fall under the authority of the Department of Religious Affairs but rather the Department of Arts. A striking feature of Khruba Bunchum is his attitude toward Mahāyāna Buddhism, specifically his dedication to Tibetan meditation and his repeated visits to Bhutan, which blurs the imagined boundary between state sanctioned Theravada and Mahāyāna (223). Khruba Bunchum's acceptance of diverse

practices is also evident in his absorption into the traditional Lahu religious pantheon. In fact, the Lahu believe that Bunchum is a reincarnation of the Lahu prophet named Maw na and they have given him a Lahu name, Ca mvuh. Khruba Bunchum's popularity is attested by his consistent interaction with the Lahu, which also indicates his acceptance of their beliefs. This chapter is fascinating in its exploration of how Khruba Bunchum has incorporated aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhism, traditional Lahu beliefs, and contemporary Buddhist millennial myths, to establish his own "Buddha kingdom" Utopia in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands, all whilst evading the state-controlled centralized Buddhist sangha.

Charismatic Monks is a thoughtful and important addition to contemporary Buddhist Studies literature. For readers unfamiliar with Lanna Buddhism or the *ton bun* tradition, it is best to read these chapters as a set as they are presented in this volume. As a comprehensive introduction to the subject is provided in earlier chapters, they are pertinent to understanding later chapters. *Charismatic Monks* provides a wonderful initiation into the range of ethnic groups and regional practices that constitute Lanna Buddhism. Clearly, the *ton bun* monks that are central to this volume are endowed with charismatic qualities, but the nature of *barami* remains elusive. *Barami* is glossed as "charisma" and is linked to *pāramī*, but it is not interrogated in any great detail. Whilst the chapters in this volume make it clear that it is a quality that characterizes *ton bun* monks, it is not clear exactly how *barami* is acquired or legitimated. The great strength of *Charismatic Monks* is the engaging ethnographic detail and anthropological reflections that illuminate a long-overlooked area of Buddhist Studies. Scholarship on Theravada Buddhism has tended to focus on state authorized central Buddhism rather than the practices on the geographical and religious peripheries; however, this volume indicates an exciting shift in contemporary research. Such research will undoubtedly reveal insights into the practice of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia and challenge outdated assumptions on what constitutes Theravada; for

example, the inclusion of pre-Buddhist concepts of gods in the contemporary Lahu pantheon. *Charismatic Monks* opens a window for future exploration of the types of texts utilized by the *ton bun*. The question of whether those texts are canonical or non-canonical, or whether these are important distinctions to make in the study of Lanna Buddhism remains. *Charismatic Monks* potentially marks the beginning of more focused scholarship on Tai and non-Tai Theravada groups in this borderland region, rich in its own distinctive history and traditions. In all, this is a highly readable collection that will appeal to scholars and students of anthropology, Buddhist Studies and Southeast Asia regional studies.

Notes on the Contributor

Olivia Porter is a PhD candidate at King's College London. Her research focuses on Tai Theravada in Myanmar and its borders. Olivia is a Dissertation Fellow (2021) of the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Program in Buddhist Studies.

Correspondence to: Olivia Porter.

Email: olivia.c.porter@kcl.ac.uk