

Ian Harris, ed., *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*. London and New York, Routledge, 2007, 237 pp.

Ian Harris should be congratulated for his efforts to bring together a collection of fresh and thoughtful essays written by nine leading scholars working on Theravada Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia. Given the ongoing political crises in several Theravada Buddhist states, especially Burma, Cambodia, and Thailand, the release of this publication is intellectually relevant and timely.

This edited volume is the product of an intensive multidisciplinary symposium on the interface between religion and politics in Theravada South and Southeast Asia, which Harris organized in mid-April 2004 while serving as a senior scholar at the Becket Institute, St Hugh's College, Oxford University. The central theme of the volume deals with how and to what extent Theravada Buddhism has, as a religious institution and culture, interacted and negotiated with political and other forces of modernization, such as secular education, forms of governance, kingship, and post-colonial politics in mainland Southeast Asian countries (excluding Vietnam) since the late pre-modern period. It particularly focuses on the ways Theravada Buddhism has defined and redefined "a general concept of power conceived from a political perspective". (p.3)

Essays in this volume cover diverse subjects and different periods in political history of four modern nation-states. The quality of the contributions is rather

uneven. Although they are brought together under the common theme of Buddhism, power, and political order, individual authors discuss Theravada Buddhism from different entry points, historical periods, and disciplinary angles. It is difficult to pinpoint the central arguments in the volume, which begins with a discussion on comparative monastic education in Burma and Thailand. In Chapter One, "Idealism and Pragmatism: A Dilemma in the Current Monastic Education Systems of Burma and Thailand", Ven. Khammai Dhammasami discusses some common dilemmas of monastic education in Burma and Thailand, such as whether or not the Sangha should embrace secular Western subjects, which are denoted by the derogatory term of "animal sciences" (*tiracchanavija*), in their monastic curricula. Idealistic and pragmatic stances have emerged in both the Burmese and Thai Sangha regarding the goals and contents of monastic education. This dilemma is indicative of how Buddhist orders in both countries have been struggling to make themselves relevant in the modern world.

Burmese Buddhism and its role in politics are the contents in the next two chapters. In Chapter Two, "Rajadhamma Confronts Leviathan: Burmese Political Theory in the 1870s", Andrew Huxley provides an account of Burma's Buddhist political theory through works by U Kyaw Htun and U Hpo Hlaing. Huxley's essay is well documented and thoughtful. His attempts to reconstruct an unfinished work on traditional

Buddhist kingship written by leading Burmese Buddhist scholars demonstrate his own original scholarship. Through a careful reading of these indigenous scholars, Huxley argues that Burmese Buddhist scholars, at least in the nineteenth century, were highly conscious of radical political and economic changes in the modern world. Juliane Schober, in Chapter Three: "Colonial Knowledge and Buddhist Education in Burma", demonstrates how monastic education has been politicized by the government in Burma and how modern knowledge was incorporated into Buddhist curricula. Schober shows the consistent government manipulation of monastic education, as well as its attempts to reorient its purpose to serve the political status quo. Monastic education and Sangha affairs were always included as key elements in a national agenda and drew serious attention from the country's pre-modern and modern leaders.

The next two chapters deal with Buddhism and politics in postcolonial Cambodia. In Chapter Four, "Reconstructing the Cambodian Polity: Buddhism, Kingship and the Quest for Legitimacy", Peter Gyallay-Pap skillfully draws some theoretical implications out of case studies of Khmer Buddhist political culture and tries to understand why Western liberal or representative politics continue to be elusive in postcolonial Cambodia. He argues that any attempts to understand the political culture in Cambodia must include the Buddhist monarchy, the Sangha, and village-based society. In a way, Cambodia's model could provide

a criticism of the Western-centric paradigm of a liberal representative polity. John Marston, in Chapter Five, "The Cambodian Hospital for Monks", tells a story of how a Cambodian hospital for monks was built "at the moment of the country's independence" (p.104). He points out that the construction of a hospital was indeed a modern project embedded in Cambodia's traditional/pre-modern cultures and institutions of kingship and Buddhism. It serves as an example of how reformed Buddhism is consistent with specific visions of modernity in the country.

The volume includes two chapters on Lao Buddhism, which is usually a neglected area in the world of Theravada studies. Both chapters are concerned with the pre-modern Laos Buddhist kingship and prophetic literature of the Lao people residing on both sides of the Mekong. In Chapter Six, "Buddhism, Power, and Political Order in Pre-Twentieth Century Laos", Volker Grabowsky examines when and how Theravada Buddhism became the dominant religion and how it shaped the conceptions of kingship in pre-colonial Laos. He believes that Laos fully entered the Theravada world later than most neighboring polities. Rulers and elite had embraced the religion around the mid-fifteenth century. Lao kings took the concepts of righteous king (*dhammaraja*) and universal ruler (*cakkavartin*) seriously and the royal domains of land and manpower were crucial in the pre-colonial Lao Buddhist polity. In the following chapter, "Past, Present and

Future in Buddhist Prophetic Literature of the Lao”, Peter Koret deals with Lao prophetic Buddhist literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and considers how Buddhist Lao anticipated modernization and its consequences through prophetic literature. He argues that prophetic literature describing the decline of Buddhism illustrates the historical, cultural, and literary dimensions of the meaning of the future as prophesied in the past. This chapter is written more like a preliminary study and its analysis needs expansion.

The two final chapters consider topics on Thai Buddhist cultures from widely separated spectra. They discuss subjects as diverse as a contemporary cult of a Buddhist earth deity with fertility power and legal literature in pre-modern Siam. Elizabeth Guthrie in Chapter Eight, “In Defence of the Nation: The Cult of Nang Thoranee in Northeast Thailand”, argues that the beliefs and practices surrounding the cult of Nang Thoranee are embedded in contemporary Thai political and economic realities. The cult can be seen as one of many emerging nationalist cults in the midst of the country’s economic crisis and the Thais’ psychological despair at takeovers by foreign financial interests. This chapter is descriptive by nature with less illustrative theoretical and ethnographic analysis. The place of the cult of Nang Thoranee in the northeastern Thai popular religion is debatable, and so is its modern political significance.

The final chapter, “King, Sangha and Brahmins: Ideology, Ritual and Power

in Pre-modern Siam”, by Peter Skilling, presents a textual analysis of pre-modern Siamese ideals of political superstructure. He uses the model of the ritual state to explain how political ideologies of kinship, Buddhist monastic order, and Brahmins formed the hybrid complex cosmology for the Siamese ruling class. He argues that these combinations were distinctively Thai. Skilling includes the Brahmins into what otherwise is generally known as Buddhist polity and criticizes the concept of legitimizing power. His reading of Thai-language sources provides many new insights.

While one can admire the overall contributions in this volume to the field of Theravada Buddhist studies, it should be noted that the book has its disadvantages. The essays are not neatly tied together, and seem to be arranged rather by countries or bounded Buddhist traditions rather than scholarly themes. The related themes or contents in the individual essays are not always fully discussed in terms of theoretical or ethnographical comparison. The theoretical and empirical highlights need to be more substantially and intensively discussed right from the beginning. The volume does not situate itself firmly or critically within the contexts of contemporary scholarship in the field and the introductory chapter fails to address these needs.

*Buddhism, Power and Political Order* is, in spite of these criticisms, a timely and rich volume. Some of the individual chapters are stronger in their scholarship than others. The book remains a very

useful reader for students and others with a serious interest in the complex junctures between modern politics and the Theravada Buddhist worlds in mainland Southeast Asia.

Pattana Kitiarsa

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Nicol Guérin and Dick van Oenen, *Thai Ceramic Art – The Three Religions*. Singapore, Sun Tree Publishing, 2005, 310 pp., 439 colour plates, 396 figures and line drawings.

This beautifully illustrated book on Thai ceramics is extremely interesting and engaging. It takes a very different approach to the subject than previous studies. Roxanna Brown, in her earlier review in the September–October 2005 *Southeast Asian Ceramics Newsletter* has written, ‘It is a work of interpretation in contrast to past inventory-like books on Thai ceramics.’ The authors have examined ceramic production of the present-day Sukhothai region during the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries in the light of Thai history, culture and religion, with the focus of the work on the ‘ecclesiastical usage of Thai ceramics.’ Many new and stimulating ideas are introduced in the book; some are controversial and deserve serious discussion.

The complex history of the early Thai states and the influences that shaped their philosophies, politics and religions are presented in an interesting, sometimes lyrical, way. The evolution of Thai art, craft and architecture is discussed, with considerable detail devoted to the analyses of the motifs featured on the ceramics. The meaning of Thai figurative art has been the subject of much scholarly debate. The authors have examined a variety of ceramic vessels and figurines that may have been used in animist, Buddhist and Hindu ritual