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*Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural
Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society*

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A Review of *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society*

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Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society. By Juliane Schober. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011, 190 pages, ISBN 978-0824833824 (pbk), \$49.00.

In *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society*, Juliane Schober examines several “conjunctures” or “pivotal moments” between the 17th century and the present that acutely demonstrate the complex dynamics between Theravāda Buddhism and the country’s political centers, offering a glimpse into how Buddhists have entered the public sphere. It is during these times throughout the course of recent Burmese history when “modern political formations, for instance, nationalism, secular power, education, identity, colonialism, ethnicity, and otherness, are articulated and become visible in culturally and historically specific contexts” (1). Schober demonstrates that the state, in order to rule effectively, has and continues to rely on the moral authority of the *sangha*. This underlying need for moral legitimacy was required for early Buddhist kings, during British colonial rule, and continues today with the military regime. Indeed, it is precisely this granting or denial of moral authority by the

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sangha to secular powers that has fundamentally contributed to the widespread distrust the populace has expressed toward the state.

The primary thesis of *Conjectures* seeks to dispel the myth set forth by Max Weber; i.e., that Buddhist monks, according to monastic rules (*vinaya*), must refrain from engaging in any political discourse and action, or else risk their status as “authentic,” “otherworldly” renunciants. To counter this argument, Schober argues that since “Buddhist conceptions and practices are intimately tied to conceptions of political power in social, economic, and political realm[s],” Buddhist monastics and laity act both politically and religiously in public (11–20). Thus, Buddhist social and political resistance against the state, in its non-violent and forceful methods, is typically grounded in a “moral judgment” (99). That is, when a government is viewed as unjust and unethical, its inability to regulate “worldly matters (*lokiya*)” and all other human action, which manifests necessarily through Buddhist Law, is implicit (147). By seeking to understand these complex relationships between Buddhists and state powers, scholars more accurately reflect actual Buddhist practice. Moreover, Schober’s thesis allows scholars to resist the colonial discourse (from which Weber’s ideas emerged) that offers “an orientalist reading of the *vinaya* that privileges some modern Buddhist interlocutors, while silencing other Buddhist voices who contest prevailing hegemonies” (120).

Chapters one through seven focus on particular historical periods in which the intertwined relationship of Buddhism and politics is clearly visible. The first chapter focuses on pre-colonial Burma, while the remaining six examines the colonial and post-colonial periods. First, Schober articulates periods of renaissance and reform by the royal courts between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, when the state was modeled after the traditional Buddhist polity centered around the ideal Buddhist king (*dhammarāja*). Through an economy of merit and the ability to offer religious counsel, monks validated the role of the king; while, on the other hand, mandated court rituals reinforced loyalty

to the throne in the provinces among Burmese and other ethnic groups. For example, the royal reforms of King Bodawpaya sought to ensure a centralization of the polity by editing the texts of the Theravāda Pāli canon to generate “orthodox” versions more accurately reflecting the “true” word of the Buddha, constructing Buddhist monuments, heightening the standards of monastic education, conducting purges within the Buddhist ranks, and handing out punishments to the followers of monks deemed threatening to the state. In this way, the court was able to claim its concern for the Buddhist *dhamma* and for constructing a “utopian” Buddhist society with a *dhammarāja* at its helm.

The modern Burmese state has also used Buddhist reform to validate their legitimacy, and to quash any contestations from the *sangha*. At the same time, Buddhists have had to face the challenges of secular ideas and various political and economic ideologies. U Nu, the first and three-time Prime Minister of Burma, in the 1950s and 1960s promoted a democratic government that emphasized a “programmatic Buddhist revival,” utilizing “Buddhist missionary efforts to implement the politics of the nation-state,” and simultaneously ushered in an era of incredibly popular lay meditation. U Nu also proposed the “Burmese Buddhist Way to Socialism,” which compared national development to progress along the Eightfold Noble Path (77–79). During the 1980s, however, Ne Win, leader of the military regime from 1962–1988, tried to control influential monks (e.g., by disrobing them), their financial incomes, and their followers, in order to centralize Buddhist institutions. Like their royal predecessors, Ne Win and beginning in 1988 the State Law and Order Council (SLORC; changed to the State Peace and Development Council [SPDC] in 1997), tried to glean Buddhist legitimacy through the “purification” of texts, merit-making rituals connected to the state, and the construction and restoration of religious monuments (78).

After outlining these religious revivals and reforms spearheaded by the state, Schober discusses how these were often met with resistance

from the *sangha*. During the uprising of monks and students in 1988 against Ne Win's government, when unofficial numbers estimate hundreds were killed and thousands went missing, monks played an important role in mobilizing antigovernment resistance, transmitting information through an "internal monastic network," administering local infrastructure, and safely harboring student protestors in monasteries (107).

Schober interestingly notes that monastic resistance relies in part on monks who can refuse to accept merit, and thereby disrupt the ritual exchange of *dāna*. In 1990 and again in 2007, monks organized mass campaigns to boycott accepting donations by the military and their families. This refusal to allow merit-making disrupted the foundational economy of merit inherent in Burmese Buddhist society, while aptly demonstrating the connection between monks, lay members of society, and central state power (108).

Schober further argues that meditation has been used as a tool of political resistance. Meditation movements, often viewed as "synonymous with political resistance," became places where pro-democracy advocates could be part of a community with similar ideals, engage in freedom of thought, and remain relatively protected from government scrutiny (109). Moreover, Schober argues that Aung San Suu Kyi, "perhaps the first modern female ascetic to engage in civil resistance," seeks to "infuse the ethics of everyday politics with the spiritual and ascetic power she gains through meditation under house arrest" (111).

Colonization by the British brought to Burma a political power that was, for the first time, without religious foundations, and the regime's insistence on secularism and disinterest in religious intuitions ultimately fueled anti-colonial sentiments. By separating the religious sphere from the political one—by prohibiting public protests by monastics and laity, and so on—the policies of the British government pushed political discourse and resistance into the religious domain, and

“ensured that Burmese cultural debates about modern concerns unfolded mostly within Buddhist frameworks” (6). And so, colonial powers weakened the institutions of Buddhism, but not necessarily the culturally and religiously embedded conceptions of legitimate power surrounding these institutions.

In Chapter three, Schober examines education at the intersection of colonial values and existing Buddhist forms of education. Prior to colonization, the Buddhist institution was the primary locus of education, with monks considered to be the essential sources not only of basic and advanced levels of *dhamma*, but basic literacy throughout all levels of society (23–24). Colonial education encountered resistance from the *sangha*, who saw it as a “threat to monastic authority, autonomy, and ethics.” However, orchestrated primarily by the lay organization of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association during the 1910s, it also created the desire for Buddhist teachings alongside subjects like mathematics in government schools with lay teachers. Furthermore, for many, after independence during the 1950s and 1960s, colonial education created the lasting desire for “scientific rationality” in Buddhist teachings, but in such a way that “scientific knowledge was now subordinate to a modern Buddhist cosmology” (47). On the one hand, since monastic schools were not “conduits of colonial knowledge” the *sangha* became less culturally and politically relevant; on the other, the *sangha* was now positioned against the colonial powers, and thus became the venue for resistance against the political power and “modern knowledge” brought by colonialism (55).

Schober clearly and convincingly accomplishes her task of dispelling Weber’s “otherworldly” Buddhist monastic. Another benefit of this book is its clear introduction and survey of key historical moments in Burma’s history; kings, colonialism, lay meditation movements, monks’ protests in 1988 and 2007, and even a discussion of Aung San Suu Kyi make their way into the 154 pages of *Conjunctures*. Indeed, one of the primary advantages of this book is its accessibility to someone new to

the study of Burmese Buddhism. While it is true that each topic is given only cursory explanation, and only in specific reference to the author's thesis, the enthusiastic reader may nevertheless find herself searching for the texts cited in the bibliography and extensive footnotes in order to expand on the many topics covered.

Even though Schober successfully proves her thesis, several complex terms such as "tradition," "secularism," "Western," and "Burmese" are left wanting in definition. The most notable example of this is that there is no discussion, in either the text or the footnotes, of the meaning of "modern" or "modernity" in this or any other context. Throughout the text, it is implied that modernity is inherently a foreign (i.e., "Western" concept) as it is juxtaposed to "traditional" Buddhist ideals and ideologies. That which is modern—products, ideas, and education—all arrive with the British, and challenge that which is "traditional." Moreover, it is unclear how modernity—specifically Buddhist modernity—was understood by particular groups or actors (e.g., the Young Men's Buddhist Association, or leaders of the 2007 Saffron Revolution). Did these organizations engage with these specific terms? Or, is Schober simply trying to distinguish between a pre-colonial period and the time since occupation? Within the context of these "conjunctures," a critical engagement of what these terms *could* have meant and *do* mean at specific times and places within history and contemporary religious practice would certainly have been fruitful.

Emerging from this lack of clarification is an opaque distinction between a pre-colonial, "traditional hegemonic political system" of Theravāda conceptions of political power, and a colonial, modern project that weakened this. That is, the former's centralized conception of power totally "encompassed cultural, economic, and religious histories" (18), while the latter undermined this via the "fragmented nature of modern knowledge" in regard to "cultural, social, economic, [and] scientific bodies of knowledge" (8). Schober explains that the competition in forms of knowledge created a "cultural and religious

crisis of authority,” and so ideas like “the rule of a *dhammarāja* and the righteousness of the *dhamma* were challenged by the modern realities of colonial rule” (56).

This distinction implicitly suggests that prior to the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824, first in Lower Burma and later in Upper Burma, there existed a “hegemonic” and unified Buddhism. This line of argumentation depends entirely on the politically powerfully centers (e.g., kings) and assumes they had control, both geographically and ideologically, over their subjects. Without denying this possibility out of hand, this rigid distinction fails to articulate the diversity in autonomous forms of Buddhist values and practices that were, almost certainly, pervasive throughout the region. How, within the Buddhist community, were various worldviews and knowledge contested? How did various people and communities understand the role of an ideal *dhammarāja* and *sangha*? While people were certainly challenged by and forced to respond in new ways to colonization, this does not mean they did not question, engage with, or confront other conflicting ideologies (even those with a “Theravāda” Buddhist framework). While the kings of Burma certainly exhibited great levels of power and influence over many Buddhists, the extent to how far this power stretched is unknown.

I do not mean to suggest that Schober thinks of pre-colonial Buddhism in Burma as completely hegemonic. In fact, she writes, “It is misleading to describe the sangha as uniform or monolithic at any historical moment, and today the sangha continues to represent considerable local diversity in its practices, teachings, and multiethnic composition” (33). However, in setting up her thesis and primary dialogue within the book as “genealogies of hegemony and subjugation, patronage and resistance, and power and loss” (1), the lack of precise clarity on her understandings of modernity and hegemony may lead to some confusion.

Nonetheless, I would certainly recommend this book. Schober has accomplished the difficult task of presenting many complex events in a

manner that is lucid and accessible. Scholars and students of Buddhism will benefit from her presentation of the multifaceted roles of the *sangha* and lay practitioners in their relationships to the state—an incredibly complex dynamic that continues to unfold daily between Buddhists and the current military regime.