



Janet McLellan. *Many Petals of the Lotus: Five Asian Buddhist Communities in Toronto*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999, xii + 264 pages, ISBN 0-8020-4421-2, US \$60.00 (cloth); 0-8020-8225-4, US \$24.95 (paper).

*Reviewed by*

Lionel Obadia  
*Lecturer in Anthropology*  
*Université Charles-de-Gaulle Lille 3*  
*Villeneuve D'Ascq, France*  
obadia@univ-lille3.fr

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The massive appeal of Buddhism in Western countries and the adoption of Buddhist beliefs and practices by growing numbers of Westerners have gained widespread and sensational coverage by the media. Consequently, “Western Buddhism” has become defined mainly as “white Buddhism,” and Asian Buddhism has been more or less neglected in such studies, especially in France. The notable exception to this trend is migration studies, but even here conversion issues have received very little attention. Some recent publications have deliberately refocused attention upon Asian Buddhism and migration issues. Among these, Janet McLellan’s book offers a complete, concise, and detailed investigation into Asian Buddhism in Canada, reminding us that the study of Buddhism in the West is also concerned with cultural and religious continuity, identity, and ethnicity in Asian-born communities.

*Many Petals of the Lotus* is divided into six chapters: an overview of Buddhist groups in Toronto, which provides a general introduction to the main characteristics of Buddhism in Canada, followed by five studies of local Asian communities (Japanese, Tibetan, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Chinese). McLellan’s perspective differs from classical (literary) studies of Buddhism. Her focus is upon social dynamics and the responses of Buddhist traditions to exile, migration, resettlement, and challenges of the modern world, rather than upon “canonical” doctrine or ritual. Several approaches are combined to explain the complexity of the establishment of

Asian Buddhism in Canada, at the same time highlighting political, social, cultural, and religious contexts; the dialectics of change and preservation within traditional cultural models and traditional institutions; and the dynamics of the process of identity through ethnicity.

Following recent theoretical developments in American anthropology, the author considers tradition to be a social construction or invention, rather than a fixed and immutable reality. If Buddhism plays a key role in the process of ethnic identification and in the formation of communities, Asian integration into a multicultural society such as Canada involves alterations in tradition; that is, a redefinition of both cultural and religious heritage. This is all the more important because the maintenance of cultural identities and the preservation of traditions are encouraged by the Canadian government and at the same time are subject to social and political restraints as well as pressures regarding accommodation and assimilation.

As the author explains, Japanese settlement in Canada, which dates back to the nineteenth century, has been deeply affected by the twentieth century's history. During World War II, Japanese immigrants suffered internment (in British Columbia) and discrimination, and their ties with their country of origin were disrupted. However, despite the temporary prohibition of visible religious practices among the Japanese, Buddhism (mainly *Jōdo-Shinshū*) maintained cultural continuity by virtue of continued private religious practices during and after this period. The five generations of Japanese (*Issei*, *Nisei*, *Sansei*, *Yusei*, and *Shinijusha*) were better able to integrate into Canadian society due to better acculturation. Conversion to Christianity was a key to integration, and despite pressure for social and religious assimilation, Christian influences remained rather superficial, apparently limited to the adoption of organizational models from the Protestant Church. Despite difficulties and conflicts between generations of immigrants, ethnic identity has recently been reaffirmed through Buddhist temples as a response to Christian evangelization, and it is now extending to the global scale of worldwide Japanese overseas networks that create new ties with the "motherland," Japan.

The Tibetan community is the smallest of the Buddhist communities in Toronto, but it maintains a "very strong sense of ethnic and religious identity" (p. 74). Few Western countries have hosted Tibetan refugees fleeing the Chinese invasion, with the exceptions of Switzerland (in 1963) and Canada (in 1968). In Toronto, family is the basic structure of the Tibetan community, which maintains close ties with other Tibetan communities in Canada. Although Tibetan Buddhism is well-known due to media coverage, Tibetan ethnic identity is quite subtle, and is based on a "subjective sense of intimate identity" (p. 98) that reveals strong mental connections

with the country of origin and the refugees' religious heritage. The success of Tibetan Buddhism among Westerners and the "mystical" imagery of Tibet in Western minds are of little interest to Tibetan refugees. Moreover, though Tibetan Buddhists and Western practitioners share the same symbols of religious authority and sometimes the same places of worship, they neither intermingle nor communicate. The role of the *lamas* is consequently ambiguous because they are involved in providing both religious teaching to Westerners and private advice and guidance to Tibetan families. Here, too, ethnicity is torn between integration (adoption of a Western lifestyle) and preservation of traditional customs.

The large flow of Vietnamese refugees toward Europe and North America in the late 1970s is directly linked to the long-lasting conflicts endured by Vietnam and the Vietnamese people, who went through a traumatic experience as "boat people." Associations, networks, and temples were quickly established in order to preserve their cultural heritage and to provide services to an ethnically and religiously heterogeneous community (practicing Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, traditional cults, and even Catholicism). According to McLellan, the Vietnamese *sangha*'s efforts are devoted to ensuring a positive resettlement experience and foiling the proselytization strategies of Canadian Christian organizations, despite the social and economic problems encountered by community members and the difficulties encountered by inexperienced monks in facing such a challenge. Discussing the polarization of the Vietnamese community between accommodation and preservation, the author pays particular attention to Thich Nhat Han's claims for a "modern" and "engaged" Buddhism (p. 112). However, this trend is not representative of the whole Vietnamese community. Unfortunately, this emphasis on Vietnamese Buddhist "modernization" reveals a one-sided interpretation that partially weakens McLellan's argument.

The Cambodian community has also experienced war and exile, but has encountered profound difficulties in settling and getting organized in Canada. Two explanations are put forward by the author (p. 134): the lack of a unified and encompassing structure, and the traumatic experience of exile after the armed intervention of the United States in Southeast Asian wars and the Khmer Rouge's regime of genocide. The Cambodians' efforts to retain Buddhist values and practices underlies the importance of ethnicity and national identification to the country of origin, despite the fact that Cambodia has suffered deeply from a complete political and social reshaping by the communist regime, from the collapse of the economic system after the incursion of the Vietnamese army into Cambodia, and from the foundation of the People's Republic of Kampuchea. Cambodians

who escaped to border countries such as Thailand faced very tough living conditions in refugee camps. About twenty thousand of them reached Canada in the early 1980s, where they did not benefit from governmental services and support or from post-trauma treatment. Though their efforts to build temples on the traditional model (that is, as the community support) were hardly fruitful, Cambodians remain strongly attached to their religion and especially to the belief in spirits (*Neak Ta*), which fulfills a basic role in mental health among refugees. One of the major problems encountered by Cambodians is the ethnic stratification demarcating “real Khmer” and people from Kampuchea. Such a situation facilitated the penetration of Christian influences, which remains a source of division in ethnic identification.

The Chinese community is the largest and most diversified in Canada, with hundreds of thousands of Chinese-born individuals, more than thirty temples, and a wide range of Buddhist schools and ethno-religious services. In the last ten years, the dramatic increase of the Chinese population in Canada is the result of political and economic changes in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. As the Chinese population becomes more heterogeneous (on ethnic, sociological, linguistic, and even religious levels), McLellan refers to the concept of “sub-ethnicities” (p. 161) as a tool for understanding different patterns of immigration and integration. Most of the Chinese are foreign-born, of various ethnic and national origins, although immigrants from Hong Kong are now the largest part of the full Chinese population of Toronto. The Chinese presence is highly visible, although somewhat concentrated in residential areas (“Chinatowns”), each sub-ethnic group having chosen a specific area of settlement. Chinese integration into Canadian society entails the adoption of Western economic, social, and even technological models. Even if institutions such as family and kinship have declined in the processes of social restructuring, religion remains important and becomes “the basis for new systems of social supports” (p. 164) in the sense that religious organizations respond to both identity problems and other adaptive needs. Chinese religion encompasses Buddhist and non-Buddhist (Confucian) practices and beliefs in the same matrix, with the recent addition of Christianity. This religious tolerance is considered by the author as another effort to fit Canadian cultural, religious, and social diversity although national, linguistic, age, and class distinctions still remain prominent among the Chinese. Nevertheless, Chinese Buddhist organizations maintain control over their members. McLellan notices the emergence of innovative trends in Chinese Buddhism (lay organizations and “modern” conceptions of religion) parallel to traditional (or conservative) orientations within institutional organizations such as temples (pp. 171–172). These lay or nonaffiliated organizations and groups represent

new religious options in the large field of Chinese Buddhist schools, branches, and temples, which remain distinctly separate from one another in the absence of an umbrella organization. Thus, Chinese Buddhist groups maintain closer ties with overseas networks and with their homeland than among themselves.

In conclusion, Janet McLellan's book demonstrates with clarity the gap between scriptural and practical approaches to Buddhism, and the small value of "scholarly" models of Buddhism in understanding the dynamics of religious identity in the context of migration. The role of Buddhist values is definitely not that which one would expect; those values are confronted by new surrounding realities, altered, and partly reshaped. Therefore, a book such as *Many Petals of the Lotus* invites us to give up comfortable statements such as "Buddhist values give sense to resettlement" for a more critical examination of the adaptations occurring in cultural and religious values and models. According to the author, Buddhism in Toronto reflects both local and global processes of change within Buddhist traditions. In the context of migration, each Asian group has its own history, ethnic composition, social structuring, and pattern of accommodation to Canadian society. Nevertheless, beyond those peculiar features, Buddhism is still the main support for social structuring and ethnic identification, and the more it is institutionalized, the more efficient it is at responding to social pressures and non-Buddhist influences, especially Christianity. Transformations that are occurring in Buddhist practices and beliefs depend on accommodative strategies embraced by each community, contributing toward the reshaping of traditions and the incorporation of new elements. Finally, the question of ethnic and religious identity arises with accuracy because there are many different means and levels of identification inside and outside Asian communities.

A major methodological criticism can be made of this volume. Indeed, it is presented as a comparative study. Nevertheless, McLellan wavers between, on the one hand, a very detailed history and description of each community and, on the other hand, sporadic theoretical developments. By giving preference to separate descriptive chapters, the author does not emphasize enough, in my opinion, the recurrent processes that she observed. Thus, the reader loses the theoretical thread, although McLellan offers some analysis in her preface, introduction, and conclusion. A theoretical recombination of the chapters would have been wiser and would have betrayed neither the contents nor the author's analysis. All the same, the fact remains that this book is a very solid and serious contribution to the study of Asian Buddhism in migration studies.