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*Race and Religion in American Buddhism: White  
Supremacy and Immigrant Adaptation*

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# A Review of *Race and Religion in American Buddhism: White Supremacy and Immigrant Adaptation*

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*Race and Religion in American Buddhism: White Supremacy and Immigrant Adaptation*. By Joseph Cheah. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 192 pages, ISBN 978-0199756285 (Hardcover), \$65.00.

American Buddhist scholarship has been a sub-field within Buddhist studies since the 1970s, exemplified by such works as Emma Layman's (1976) *Buddhism in America* and Charles Prebish's *American Buddhism* (1979). Monographs and edited volumes followed, most notably Paul Numrich's *Old Wisdom in the New World* (1996) and Wendy Cadge's *Heartwood* (2004). While some of these authors touch on the topic of race in American Buddhism, none make this a significant category of analysis. Joseph Cheah contributes to the study of this sub-field through his analysis of the American *vipassana* movement and Burmese American Buddhist adaptations. Through key terms and distinctions such as racial and cultural rearticulation, Cheah clearly illustrates the pernicious

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undercurrent of white supremacy that marks the experiences of Buddhists in America.

In the introduction Cheah argues that a latent Orientalism and racism is present—and rarely recognized—within white or convert Buddhism in America. This is demonstrated in the vestiges of white supremacy seen in rearticulations of Asian Buddhism such as secularized Buddhist practices. Cheah investigates the appropriation of these Asian Buddhist practices—most notably meditation—and the power of Euro-Americans demonstrated by this selective appropriation. In this way “white supremacy operates in the United States as an invisible standard of normality for many white Buddhists and sympathizers” (4). Cheah investigates the effects of white supremacy on both convert Buddhists and Burmese ethnic Buddhists, comparing how both groups have adapted Buddhist practices to an American context. Through these comparisons Cheah does not put forward Asian Buddhism as more authentic but focuses on the ideology of white supremacy and how it operates within these two groups. Cheah also usefully and insightfully articulates the lack of discussion of race within American Buddhist scholarship. He asserts that race has not been theorized as a category on its own terms but instead scholarship has focused on the separation between “ethnic” and “convert” Buddhists.

Chapter One, entitled “Colonial Legacy of White Supremacy in American Buddhism,” offers a racial analysis of the history of Orientalism within early Buddhist scholarship. Cheah finds that Orientalist discourses concerning Buddhism contain a racial ideology of white supremacy, which can be recognized within contemporary practices of American Buddhism. Cheah argues that Said’s *Orientalism* (1979) does not take into account racial ideologies that were embedded in the intertwined projects of imperialism and the construction of Buddhism by Euro-Americans. This chapter examines important themes that have been discussed most notably by Donald Lopez’s *Curators of the Buddha* (1995), such as the textual bias of Orientalist scholars regarding

contemporary Buddhist practice, and the Orientalist construction and demythologization of the life story of the Buddha. Cheah adds to this the notion that white supremacy was operative in the West's stance of superiority and its tendency to normalize the perception of Oriental concepts as degenerate and backwards.

The next chapter, "Buddhist Modernism and the American Vipassana Movement," focuses on the encounters between Burmese Buddhist meditation teachers and American *vipassana* practitioners—where they converged and diverged in the practice and dissemination of this practice. Cheah narrates the history of these encounters beginning in Sri Lanka and moves to key figures in Burma, who created modernist projects to make *vipassana* meditation available for everyone. In this chapter Cheah highlights individual actors such as Henry Steel Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala in Sri Lanka and Ledi Sayadaw, Mahasi Sayadaw, and U Ba Khin in Burma. Critiquing previous scholarship on these figures, Cheah asserts that many authors label Asian Buddhist teachers as modernists without attending to their traditionalist tendencies as well. I would go beyond this to state that labeling individual Buddhists in terms of categories of "modernist" or "traditionalist" is not useful. At times Cheah reifies these binary categories by describing how Burmese monks worked with both "traditional," "Eastern" Buddhists as well as "modern," "Western" sympathizers. It is not helpful to label Mahasi Sayadaw or U Silananda as both "modern" and "traditional," because the fact that they embody both tendencies merely illustrates how irrelevant these categories have become. Cheah is insightful, however, in his attempt to connect the Orientalist valorization of Buddhist texts to the practice of meditation abroad, seeing as both these trends are compatible in different eras with Western needs and interpretations.

Chapter Three, "Adaptation of Vipassana Meditation by Convert Buddhists and Sympathizers," with its distinction between racial rearticulation and cultural rearticulation, is perhaps the most important

of the book. Cheah defines racial rearticulation as “the acquisition of the beliefs and practices of another’s religious tradition and infusing them with new meanings derived from one’s own culture in ways that preserve the prevailing system of racial hegemony” (59-60). This is distinct from a type of rearticulation that is cultural in intention and is unavoidably a way of representing a religious tradition that resonates with a new culture. Racial rearticulation maintains and reinforces the power imbalance of Orientalist racial projects, while cultural rearticulation may not. Once cultural rearticulation is used to assert the superiority of one way of practicing Buddhism over another cultural rearticulation becomes racial rearticulation. Cheah argues that cultural rearticulation is a historically ordinary way that religious traditions adapt to new contexts but as practitioners of Buddhism in the West begin to remove all cultural accretions of Asian Buddhism, claiming inauthenticity, this becomes racial rearticulation.

Chapter Four discusses the assimilation experiences of Burmese Americans within the larger and more general demographic of Asian Americans. Cheah emphasizes both the resistance and accommodation of Burmese American Buddhists through looking at historical, political, and racial dimensions. Chapter Five, “Monastic and Domestic Settings,” examines more specifically, Burmese Buddhist immigrants and how they engage with their tradition, their strategies for resisting conformity, and the agency of their communities as they navigate the American religious landscape. This chapter gives some context on the Burmese Buddhist communities of California, specifically Dhammananda and Mettananda monasteries. Cheah finds that temples are significant places to resist assimilation, citing food as a major link for social groups. After describing these monasteries, Cheah discusses the temporary ordination ritual and its adaptations in America as well as the place of Burmese language classes and scholarship programs. In discussing monastic adaptations to American contexts, Cheah points to Burmese monks learning to drive cars, microwave their food, and their inability to collect alms in traditional ways. There is not much new in this section as

Buddhist scholars have discussed these basic adaptations in other works. Cheah's main argument, though, is that Burmese Buddhist immigrants are not passive—they selectively resist and accommodate American cultural norms.

In terms of assimilation, there is also influence from the Burmese military regime, which exerts some influence on Burmese expatriates. To this end, in Chapter Six, "Burmese Loyalty Structure and the Dual Domination Paradigm," Cheah offers a historical background of Burmese immigration and recent history of Burma. Cheah finds that it is difficult for the Burmese military regime to evoke any loyalty from former citizens as they have threatened the lives of many. Instead the most vocal Burmese speak out against the regime and work for international awareness of human rights abuses. The Burmese regime, however, has tried to influence the Buddhist sangha at home and abroad through presenting ecclesiastical awards and titles. Cheah finds that the Burmese government does impose an extraterritorial domination in this way, as the Burmese monks within America seem fearful to speak out. This chapter provides some useful information connecting contemporary Burma's influence to its diasporic communities. However, it is not well integrated to the larger argument of the book and does not demonstrate clear connections between the Burmese military regime and white supremacist trends in American Buddhism.

In the "Conclusion," Cheah reiterates his most important connections between the text-based Orientalists of the Victorian era and the meditation-centered Buddhists of America today, as well as the distinction between cultural rearticulation and racial rearticulation within modern Buddhism. The Conclusion also addresses the lack of articulation of race in American Buddhism through comparing the ways race has affected convert and ethnic Buddhists. One of Cheah's noble aims for this book is to aid white and ethnic Buddhists to communicate with each other and discuss issues of racism and white supremacy.

This book succeeds in offering a well-articulated analysis of race relations and white supremacy within American Buddhism. However, with its various themes of race, ethnicity theories, American Buddhism, and Buddhism in Myanmar, it does not succeed in connecting these topics in a coherent way. In the introduction Cheah does a nice job of linking each theme back to his main arguments, analyzing white supremacist ideologies within American Buddhism, but toward the end of the book this linkage is noticeably absent.

Cheah also has an interesting background in regard to his topic, as he is a first-generation Burmese and Roman Catholic priest. He discloses this unique position and how it affects his study in his dissertation, which forms the basis of the current text. In *Race and Religion in American Buddhism* he describes his insider role as a Burmese and outsider role as a Catholic and the impact it has had on ethnographic research. This important information is left out of his monograph perhaps because the ethnographic component of Cheah's research was not as extensive as for his dissertation. For the monograph Cheah focused more on his analysis of race in regard to American Buddhism. I believe this was a good choice as Cheah's incisive examination of this topic is his main contribution to American Buddhist scholarship.

This book has a wide audience not just for those interested in Asian religions and their adaptations within globalization, but also for those interested in religious studies, Asian American studies, and particularly scholars of Burma and immigrant studies. This would be a welcome addition to courses on Global Buddhism and American Buddhism as well as Race and Religion. Further, this is an important contribution to Buddhist/American Buddhist studies, especially for its perceptive analysis of racial theory. *Race and Religion in American Buddhism* acknowledges a gap within this subfield that needs to be brought forth more openly and clearly.