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## *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*

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# Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China

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*Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*. Edited by Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, ISBN: 9781107003880 (paperback), \$39.99.

This rich volume of essays is a product of the University of Bristol's Centre for Buddhist Studies research project *Buddhist Death Rituals in Southeast Asia and China* (2007-2011), directed by Paul Williams. The editors' introduction is followed by eleven contributions that focus on the presentation and analysis of empirical material. In general methodological terms, the volume's center of gravity lies clearly within the realm of ethnographically-based studies—roughly half of the contributors are anthropologists. These are complemented by three or four contributions of a more strictly art-historical, historical, or textual character, all of which however address issues of religious change/continuity or diffusion/adaptation that are quite close to similar issues addressed in some of the more ethnographic pieces. This general orientation is one of the present volume's points of originality, which sets it apart from previous publications, such as the volumes edited by Cuevas and Stone, or Stone

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and Walter, that are based more centrally on methodological approaches from the history of religions.

One might at first be tempted to assume that some papers are thematically rather similar and invite close comparative investigation; in reality, the themes, cultural contexts, and approaches are on the whole so diverse that the issue of comparison ultimately proves very challenging. This diversity is well rendered by the book's title: what are investigated here are not only standard funerary procedures, but Buddhist *funeral cultures* more broadly. These comprise standard funerary rituals for the "good" dead (with highly specific variants for dead monks, for instance) and special rituals for the "bad" dead (a particularly rich theme in Asian cultures, as we know from the studies edited by Bap-tandier), but also annual communal rituals or festivals that aim at addressing still unresolved (or unsatisfactorily resolved) death matters—potentially dangerous wandering ghosts who have not received funerary rites, or who have not found the passage to rebirth or to the afterworld, as well as the suffering denizens of hell. Beyond these various ritual units that are taken as wholes for the analysis, certain themes or dimensions of the funerary practices are also taken as objects of study: the recurrent theme of the *paṃsukūla* shroud or rag-robe (already the object of a well-known study by Bizot) or, for instance, the textual dimension of the rituals.

The authors and editors have added to the volume a highly commendable set of links pointing to the occurrence of similar themes in other contributions within the volume. However, the discussion—apart from perhaps in the introduction—only very rarely suggests how exactly bringing together these materials could generate new insights. For lack of space, the present review will only briefly discuss the eleven primary contributions in turn—it will be impossible to properly acknowledge the merits of each—and will return to the introduction and the volume as a whole at the end. The first seven contributions focus (very broadly speaking) on Southeast Asian/Theravāda contexts, and the last four on

Chinese/Mahāyāna ones, the first of these bridging the divide rather elegantly, as we will see.

Rita Langer's chapter, "Chanting as 'bricolage technique': a comparison of South and Southeast Asian funeral recitation," opens with the striking observation: "There is no ancient prescriptive text outlining in detail how a Theravāda funeral is to be conducted" (21). Langer's original contribution is to examine the twin dimensions of ritual structure and inclusion of Pāli textual elements across a number of well-documented performances in Sri Lanka, Burmese, Thai and Lao contexts. Both dimensions seemingly exhibit a certain degree of continuity, such that a set of highly recurrent "core elements," as opposed to more variable ones, may be identified. Taking her cue from Lévi-Strauss, Langer analyzes the variation in the textual composition in terms of ritual "bricolage," definitely a thought-provoking suggestion. She also recognizes that the striking overall continuity—as she perceives it, at the level of structure and Pāli textual content—equally requires an explanation, and may be the product of historical processes such as the travels of monks belonging to these various Theravāda traditions. The particular focus and methodology chosen by the author mean that the non-textual dimensions (and even local actors' perspectives on the textual dimension) get only short shrift here, but this very welcome contribution clearly offers some food for thought regarding the place of written texts in Buddhist ritual activity.

Erik Davis's contribution, "Weaving life out of death: the craft of the rag robe in Cambodian funerary ritual," then proceeds to examine the theme of the *paṃsukūla* (both a cloth offering and a sub-ritual of the funerary sequence) in its wider ramifications in Khmer funeral culture. This is a rather dense chapter (maybe somewhat lacking empirical contextualization for non-specialist readers); the approach centers on symbolic analysis. It argues that major themes of the funerary process (the *paṃsukūla*, the role of the monks, and their immunity to death pollution) need to be interpreted in the light of the larger Cambodian ritual and

agricultural spheres. The sweep of the discussion is ambitiously broad, ranging from the *paṃsukūla* rag-robe to the non-Buddhist spirits that need to be controlled, to the Buddhist temple inauguration ceremonies focusing on the *sīmā* boundaries, to the bunding of rice fields—a large, holistically somewhat coherent, chunk of a civilization.

The theme of the *paṃsukūla* cloth offering comes even more to the fore in the discussion in the next contribution, “Corpses and cloth: illustrations of the *paṃsukūla* ceremony in Thai manuscripts” by Pat-taratorn Chirapravati. Representations of funerary practices found in two nineteenth-century Thai manuscripts, in which we see a monk retrieving a *paṃsukūla* cloth from a coffin, find echoes in European written accounts dating from the first two decades of the twentieth century; today however the *paṃsukūla* consists in the offering of monks’ robes. This change “seems to have occurred after the 1940s” (91), but the evidence for this date seems to lie primarily in the abdication of King Rama VII in 1935 (which ushered in a period of great political and cultural change). The author also suggests that the change in funerary practices “can perhaps also be explained by the long-term influence” of early twentieth-century reforms such as the 1902 *sangha* act (89-90). In the end, the data is fragmentary and chronological uncertainty remains. One also wonders whether the possibility of regional and social variations in chronology or practice might have been taken into consideration: how uniform were the early twentieth century “Thai” funerary practices, and whose practices does the fragmentary historical evidence reflect?

Vanina Bouté’s chapter, “Good death, bad death and ritual restructurings: the New Year ceremonies of the Phunoy in northern Laos,” takes us to the “ethnic minority” periphery of the Theravāda world, and opens a series of chapters revolving around the differences between “good” and “bad” deaths. Bouté offers us a careful, detailed ethnography, focusing in particular on the New Year ceremonies in a Phunoy village, which comprise secondary funerals, in a context marked both by ritual restructurings under the influence of the socialist state, and by

enduring, substantial differences from more mainstream Theravāda Buddhist traditions. Thus, although monks are involved and the village Buddhist temple is the center of the ritual proceedings, the notions of production of merit and reincarnation seem absent: the Phunoy dead become ancestors, and what is at stake is their influence on processes of fertility. “Indirectly, [this contribution] reopen[s] the age-old debate about the supposed general opposition . . . between the ‘religion of Buddha’ . . . and ‘the religion of spirits’” (100); however, the possibility of such a larger discussion is merely suggested, and the chapter focuses on examining (in a finely detailed way) a Phunoy ethnographic case, highlighting the themes of fertility and social regeneration.

The following contribution, “Feeding the dead: ghosts, materiality and merit in a Lao Buddhist festival for the deceased,” by Patrice Ladwig, examines a major collective ritual focusing on relations with the dead in a more mainstream Lao Buddhist context. It pursues several explicitly formulated and welcome analytical aims. It raises questions about the ontological “fuzziness” of the beings addressed in the rituals (bad dead, ghosts, place spirits, etc.); it insists on the necessity of paying proper attention to the materiality of the ritual transactions, and in particular to the important idiom of “feeding” the dead, a key way of “nurturing and protecting the well-being of [the] community” made up of the living and the various kinds of dead (121); and it shows that this approach enables a finer analysis of the transactions with the dead, which are all too often described, in the literature on Theravāda contexts, simply in terms of a transfer (or dedication) of merit.

Alexandra de Mersan’s chapter, “Funeral rituals, bad death and the protection of social space among the Arakanese [Burma],” echoes some of the main themes of the preceding ones. In particular, it echoes Bouté’s contribution, with a description of the treatment of good and bad deaths in an “ethnic minority,” in this case in western Burma/Myanmar (in a more strongly Buddhicized context). De Mersan provides us with a very precise and clear ethnographic account. A strik-

ing feature of the funerary rituals is the importance of their normative social dimension; these explicitly rule-bound events “constitute the most prominent manifestation of the village as a social unit” (142)—a comment that might be worthwhile examining from a comparative perspective. The analysis focuses partly on “an apparent contradiction” (154): the tension between the Theravāda Buddhist idea of immediate rebirth after death and the practice of sharing merit with an entity still conceptualized as the deceased during the ensuing funerary process.

The conceptual difficulty is compounded by the important place of the non-Buddhist notion of the “butterfly-spirit (or soul)” (*lippra*, *leippya*) in that process. In their introduction, the editors suggest: “These concepts do not contradict each other, but open a space of interpretation” (12)—a space explored by the following contribution. François Robinne’s richly reflective and quite thought-provoking chapter (“Theatre of death and rebirth: monks’ funerals in Burma”) takes as its point of departure the contrast between the instantaneous process of rebirth and the extended, three-day-long ritual and theatrical performances that occur on the death of Burmese monks. It also examines the “conceptual amalgams” (178 ff.) between consciousness (*wiññyan*), butterfly soul (*leippya*), life/breath (*asak*), and mental component (*nāma*). It proposes an “analytical reconstruction” of the death-and-rebirth process: a logically orderly (too orderly?) resolution of the above-mentioned inconsistencies, “abandoning” for instance the idea held by some that the *wiññyan* is subject to rebirth (185), and arguing for the necessity (with regard to the general process) of the intermediary phase between embalment and burial or cremation, even if local actors, Robinne concedes, would not express the underlying logics in the same terms (186-187). Comparative investigation in other Theravāda contexts might have been interesting, as it might have helped to confirm or to refine the logics suggested here.

With Bernard Formoso’s chapter, “From bones to ashes: the Teochiu management of bad death in China and overseas,” the volume



goes over to Chinese Buddhist contexts, but without abandoning immediately Theravāda Southeast Asia. This text is constructed as a very clear and convincing comparative analysis, which examines a Chinese ritual, called *xiu gugu* (“refining of the orphaned bones”), dedicated to resocializing the bad dead, such as those who die without descendants, both in the Teochiu native homeland (in northeast Guangdong province) and in two overseas Teochiu communities, one in a Theravāda environment, in Thailand, and the other in a Muslim one, in Malaysia. It is noteworthy that this resocializing of the “orphaned” dead flourishes outside monastic institutions: its main promoters are businessmen and other grassroots worshippers. This is actually a somewhat recurrent feature: monks play a central part in the ritual treatment of the “normal” dead, but often a more minor one (if they are at all present) in the processing of, or relations with, the “bad” dead, as we see in the Phunoy and Arakanese cases, for instance (for the Lao, Ladwig also provides data relevant to this question).

The next case however, Ingmar Heise’s “For Buddhas, families and ghosts: the transformation of the Ghost Festival into a Dharma Assembly in southeast China,” shows that this trend with regard to the monastic involvement with “bad” death can also be reversed—here, under the influence of an authoritarian, strongly secularist regime (following earlier restrictions already imposed by the Republican government) that tends to condemn popular religious activities as “superstition” and to ban them from the public sphere, in particular in urban contexts. This contribution provides us with a very interesting analysis of the changes the “Ghost Festival” (or “Yulanpen Assembly”) has undergone in Fujian province. It also draws into the discussion the critiques voiced by Buddhist reformers regarding the centrality (in terms of the generated income and the energy invested) of death-related ritual activities in Chinese Buddhism—a modernist stance which seems however to have had little influence on popular enthusiasm for these events.

The following chapter, by Tam Yik Fai, entitled “*Xianghua foshi* (incense and flower Buddhist rites): a local Buddhist funeral ritual tradition in southeastern China,” draws our attention to a local funeral tradition also based in the northeast of Guangdong province, like the one described by Formoso. The text has a somewhat dual aim. On the one hand, the tradition is described with a primary focus on the complex structure of the rites in their most developed form. On the other, local specificities (such as rather unconventional clerics and vegetarian women as performers) as well as continuities with more mainstream Chinese Buddhist elements are mentioned. Tam concludes with the claim that, beyond the dubious question of the possibility of defining a “standard” Chinese Buddhist funeral, the present tradition clearly shows a dominant Buddhist component, and thus should be considered as a Buddhist ritual.

The final contribution, Frederick Shih-Chung Chen’s “Buddhist passports to the other world: a study of modern and early medieval Chinese Buddhist mortuary documents,” provides a very brief outline of the contemporary use of passport-like documents, addressed to the Underworld Bureau (as observed in Taiwan), and then turns to its main topic, the examination of Buddhist tomb inventories that included a passport-like petition, in fourth- to seventh-century Turfan. Chen pieces together a careful, tentative, and necessarily somewhat speculative picture of the possible role of Buddhist monks in early medieval Turfan funerals. Some continuity with the (geographically and historically) widespread pattern of chanting Buddhist scriptures for the production of merit is assumed, as well as some degree of accommodation to local customs, in that local funeral specialists in particular probably remained in charge of the burial itself. It may also have been the case that the mention of Buddhist monks in some of the passport-like inventories may have been just a popular apotropaic device. The questions raised are intriguing, but unfortunately the evidence remains fragmentary.

If we return to the introduction by Ladwig and Williams, we find here a welcome piece of ethnographically, theoretically, and doctrinally informed reflection on the diverse themes that emerge from this rich landscape of Buddhist funeral cultures. The discussion addresses a whole array of issues and themes: the Buddhist centrality of death; the tension between the “doctrinal absence” and the “anthropological presence” of the dead. The localization of Buddhist funeral cultures and the analytical question of the hierarchies or cultural orders that emerge from such processes; bad deaths, ghosts, and pollution; notions of regeneration of life that appear in funeral contexts, etc. It also suggests a wide spectrum of approaches: conceptualizing Buddhist funeral cultures as “imaginaires” (for instance, taking into account an imaginaire of continuity even where the scholar detects historical change); paying attention to the material dimension of funeral cultures; comparison, in view of identifying both recurrent patterns and important differences (a number of important and cogent suggestions are made here); or, for instance, an opening up to non-traditional contexts (urban environments, cyberspace, etc.). This text serves as a masterful introduction, but also points to a large scope of possibilities that still lie ahead.

The volume is very well produced. Some of the contributions by French scholars contain a few formulations that are linguistically awkward or improper (such as the use of the noun “corporeality” instead of an adjective—“corporeal” or “bodily”—throughout Robinne’s text); but far more important is the achievement of having brought here, in a well-designed format, first-rate research from a diverse, international group of scholars. One should note that not all contributions are explicitly integrated within larger contexts of scholarly discussion, but to some extent this may be related to the diverse disciplinary backgrounds of the authors. As in a number of edited volumes gathering recent or cutting-edge research on a given topic, some of the basics seem to have been overlooked, or assumed to be known or superfluous. My impression, however, is that a non-specialist reader, even with knowledge of other Buddhist funerary contexts, might not always be able to gain a satisfac-

tory basic idea here of the overall spatial and temporal structure, as well as ritual composition, of the funeral sequences. The complexity and diversity of funerary sequences notwithstanding, would it not have been possible, for instance in the introduction, to give an overview of the core structure and key elements of the major (at least Theravāda) variants of the funerary complex? In a sense, one could argue that the book gradually pieces together such an overall picture. Langer for instance (beyond the careful analysis of the textual dimension) provides at least a bare-bones summary of the ritual sections in which monks are involved, pointing to differences between the four Theravāda countries from which she draws her data. Ultimately, however, the reader remains in doubt: have the main aspects been mentioned, or are there major facets that may have been left out? For instance, how common for Burma/Myanmar, or how specific to Arakan, is the sequence described by de Mersan? As a last comment, one may note that the sociological dimension (the identity of the actors involved, or the variations according to gender and social status of the deceased, etc.) receives somewhat unequal attention in the volume.

The minor quibbles and questions voiced here and there in this review should not detract however from the fact that this volume contains a wealth of high-quality research and a particularly rich assortment of materials and analyses. It will constitute without a doubt an indispensable resource for further work on the treatment of death in societies shaped or penetrated by Buddhism.