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*Educating Monks: Minority Buddhism on China's
Southwest Border*

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A Review of *Educating Monks: Minority Buddhism on China's Southwest Border*

Kai Chen¹

Educating Monks: Minority Buddhism on China's Southwest Border. By Thomas Borchert. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017, ISBN 9780824866488 (hardback), \$68.00.

Educating Monks by Thomas Borchert, Associate Professor in the Department of Religion at the University of Vermont, is a timely and informative contribution to the literature of China's Theravāda Buddhism, especially Buddhism in Sipsongpannā, as well as the studies of the Dai-lue community on China's southwest border with Myanmar and Laos. The writing in this text is clear and lively, and the reader may find in it fresh insights regarding what influences monks in the Dai-lue community to practice the minority tradition of Theravāda while the majority of Chinese Buddhists believe in Mahāyāna Buddhism. The text's engaging narrative would make it a valuable book for college courses in Chinese Buddhism.

For decades, Borchert has been engaging the studies of religious minorities and Theravada Buddhism in the Indo-China Peninsula. From a comparative perspective, he examines the complexity of education in

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the Dai-lue community of Sipsongpannā in the far south of Yunan Province, scattered along the southwest frontier. In the case of Wat Pājie, the largest wat (village temple) in Sipsongpannā, the Dai-lue community has been following the traditional patterns of Theravāda Buddhism for generations. However, the current practice of Theravāda Buddhism has changed from what it used to be, especially in terms of education in the Dai-lue community.

Based on field investigation and interviews, this book explores curricular education and apprentice education in the Dai-lue community of Sipsongpannā. The former is characterized by a teacher-student relationship in public schools. The latter relies heavily on the master-apprentice relationship in village temples. However, in the Dai-lue community apprentice education seems problematic by nature because there is, “a lack of standardization in Buddhist knowledge” (113). As a result, people receiving apprentice education are often divided in opinion regarding its value. In the long run, a lack of standardization will lead to the fragmentation of knowledge and the fragmentation will eventually weaken Theravāda Buddhist education. In contrast, curricular education in public schools is good at providing “broader knowledge that is standardized to more people” (138). These two forms of education will coexist in the region for the foreseeable future.

Recently, a third option has arisen between curricular education and apprentice education. As Borchert points out, a few Dhamma schools in Wat Pājie of Sipsongpannā have figured out a way to compromise on both kinds of education. For example, on the one hand, the Dai-lue boys can learn Pāli and Sanskrit, important for reading Buddhist texts. On the other hand, Mandarin Chinese is also made available in the curriculum, which is also a part of curricular education in China.

Borchert’s research also raises interesting questions which deserve further investigation. As he argues, Theravāda Buddhism in Sipsongpannā is gendered to a large extent, although Dai-lue females are allowed to participate in monastic activities. For example, while there

are no Theravāda ordained nuns, women and girls do make charitable donations to monasteries as devout pilgrims and prayers. Dai-lue boys ordain as novices or monks and the Dai-lue girls “have been far more likely to remain in the public schools than boys.” (36) Does this mean that the Dai-lue females will be the nexus between Theravāda culture and Chinese culture? Moreover, in recent years, since 2010, the dynamics of Theravāda Buddhist education in Sipsongpannā have changed due to the opening of more Dhamma schools, which were not highlighted to a great extent in this volume. What is the current triangular relation among Dhamma schools, apprentice education, and curricular education in the Dai-lue community of Sipsongpannā?

Educating Monks, in guiding the reader through a series of cases, has succeeded in revealing monastic life in the region of China’s southwest border, acknowledging the diversity of education in the Dai-lue community. It is well organized, and accessible to both dedicated scholars and students of Buddhist studies and China studies. No doubt, this thorough and carefully researched work will also be required reading for anyone working in the field of East Asian Buddhism, where it makes exciting departures from established work in the area of minority Buddhism on China’s southwest border. Furthermore, *Educating Monks* is suitable for classroom use, stimulating productive discussion. This book is strongly recommended to readers, who will find Sipsongpannā a place of great interest.