

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics>

Volume 30, 2023

Buddhism under Capitalism

Reviewed by Stephen Christopher

University of Copenhagen

scj@hum.ku.dk

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:
vforte@albright.edu

A Review of *Buddhism under Capitalism*

Stephen Christopher¹

Buddhism under Capitalism. Edited by Richard K. Payne and Fabio Rambelli. London: Bloomsbury, 2022, 280 pages, ISBN 978-1-350-22832-0 (hardback), \$90.00, 978-1-350-22833-7 (paperback), \$29.95, 978-1-350-22835-1 (e-book), \$26.95.

The edited volume *Buddhism under Capitalism* explores how global capitalism is the predominant mode of economic relations structuring Buddhist institutions and practices. The lingering popularity of the image of the anti-materialistic monk meditating in solitude is supplanted by more ethnographic representations of how Buddhists are imbricated in daily life and produce economic value. Buddhism as world-abnegating is replaced with Buddhism as practices of everyday merit-making aimed at improving the material conditions to advance the *Dharma*. Such a view theorizes Buddhist practices within different sociocultural and economic milieus and corrects a Western misconstrual of Buddhism as foremost a mindfulness philosophy.

The central theme of the intertwining of capitalism and institutional Buddhism is historicized in chapter one. William Dewey, in conversation with recent scholarship (Jansen), discusses how Tibetan monasteries functioned as corporations, investing and loaning money, as well as

¹ Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen. Email: scj@hum.ku.dk.

trading and holding property. He tracks how religious institutions expanded their wealth through state policies and foreign patrons, eventually supplanting the aristocracy as the primary landowners. Monasteries engaged in “extractive practices,” including slave- and servant-holding and the prohibiting of untouchables, which were morally sanctioned by privileging the collective promotion of the *saṃgha* over karmic action-accruing to any one actor (30-32). Dewey also highlights how the blurring of social and economic life in Tibetan monasteries allowed for inclusiveness, innovativeness, and less rigid social hierarchies. His work decenters the Theravāda *Vinaya* and, in contrast, discusses the commonly practiced ethics governing monastic economics from the perspective of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* (which, for example, permits Tibetan monks to directly handle money whereas lay people do so in other national contexts).

The theme of how Buddhism is produced and consumed within capitalist frameworks is next elaborated by seven chapters of varied ethnographic case studies, which include spiritual marketing and tourism, “secular rationalist” Buddhisms, Buddhist psychotherapy, and credentialing mindfulness practices outside of the purview of traditional Buddhist institutions. I will quickly summarize the main thrust of each ethnography-based chapter and then linger specifically on chapters six and seven, which focus on the business ethics of female Buddhist small-scale entrepreneurs in Thailand and the normative ethics of Ladakhi Buddhist organizations practicing “connectionwork” as a delayed financial strategy imbued with karmic importance.

In brief, chapter two, by Candy Gunther Brown, examines how Reiki and mindfulness practices are branded as secular and scientific on the one hand, and spiritual without being religious on the other. This secular branding, fueled by a modern capitalist system that encourages experimentation in a marketplace of eclectic spiritual techniques, allows practitioners to charge for their services like any other secular service provider. Continuing the theme of the crossover of Buddhism and healing, chapter three, by Ira Helderman, steps back from the debate between

practitioners and scholars about the place of Buddhism in psychotherapy and focuses on the debate among psychotherapists themselves about the integration of Buddhist practice. The supposed boundary between religion and economy comes under scrutiny, as government agencies and private insurance debate how to financially value treatments that have contested empirical effectiveness. Chapter four, by Courtney Bruntz, picks up Appadurai's language of technoscapes ("Disjuncture and Difference") to explore the continuity and innovation of technologies used in Buddhist temples in East Asia. As temples adapt to economic imperatives, driven by changing consumer desires, new forms of technology, including artificial intelligence, are being innovatively put to religious use. Conversely, Buddhist temples exert degrees of agency in shaping the consumer values of followers and the wider public. This recursive dialectic of reflecting consumer taste while shaping it plays out within capitalist modes of power relations; the technological innovations that drive it can encourage either meaningful ("thick") or superficial ("thin") ritual and social engagement.

Chapter five, by Kendall Marchman, considers online tourist reviews of Buddhist religious sites in China and how they reflect conceptions of Buddhist authenticity (as spiritually pure and divorced from worldly affairs, including humdrum economics). Sites that evoke stronger authenticity are experienced with greater self-reporting satisfaction, and sites of inauthenticity are experienced with less satisfaction. These results, generated through textual analysis, are distinct from the everyday practices of tourists in the Buddhist sites examined.

And, advancing to chapter eight, authors Barbra Clayton and Della Duncan revisit the much-advertised concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) in Bhutan and contrast it with capitalist economics. The former emphasizes collective wellbeing through government intervention and nudging citizens towards consumer satisfaction with less while the latter emphasizes neoliberal individualization, financialization, and laissez-faire economics. While this chapter avoids a romantic valorization of GNH and includes sections about socioeconomic problems such as urban-rural

inequalities and youth unemployment, greater attention could have been paid to how government initiatives to increase collective wellbeing can whitewash discriminatory citizenship laws, which has led to a multi-decade refugee crisis (Hutt).

Given the venue of this book review, I want to spend more time on the ethical considerations of chapters six and seven. In chapter six, women's small business capitalism is considered among followers of Kuan Im in Thailand. As the urban middle class critiques both the perceived moral failures of national economic success and the perceived irrelevance of state-supported Buddhism, a new ethic emerges tied to alternative spiritual practice. In this case, women practice Kuan Im, a localized version of Guanyin, replacing Theravāda Buddhism with Mahāyāna traditions of Pure Land Buddhism. Kuan Im followers emphasize not only her ideal of compassion but also the notion of her moral guidance in achieving success and prosperity in business. The authors, Mark Speece and Jitnisa Roenjun, highlight various ethical considerations the women make in their small businesses (such as taking smaller margins of profit and using more "honest" advertising within the framework of "right livelihood"; articulating larger social responsibility within a framework of Buddhist interconnect- edness; using mindful practices towards employees; and practicing "serv- ant leadership," that is, putting the needs of others before oneself; 121- 126). These practices are part of a "small-is-beautiful capitalist Buddhist economics" (130).

There are several questions which emerged from reading this chapter. Methodologically, the authors approached followers in shrines and conducted interviews and survey work. Although they did not know respondents, at least one of the authors was marked as an "insider" by many because she was a fellow follower of Kuan Im (120). It is unclear how many interviews were conducted or how much interpersonal rapport was established; a discussion about how a small sample size of less than ten interviews "can reach saturation, the point when additional interviews yield little new information" (120) seems incompatible with anthropo-

logical norms for long-term participant observation as the basis of “thick” cultural description. Using surveys to measure spirituality—in this case “servant leadership” as a manifestation of spiritual leadership—raises methodological concerns from within Religious Studies (Gaitanidis 5-6). Ideally, the authors could have provided more context about the production of Kuan Im followers’ discourses of immoral economic systems and socially disengaged national Buddhism. Such discourses parallel Japanese popular perceptions of temple Buddhism as expensive and corrupt; but as Reader argues, popular images may not be supported by empirical data and need to be contextualized (“Secularisation, R.I.P.?” 130). More broadly, the chapter exemplifies a style of research within Buddhist economics that seeks out prescriptive economic alternatives—such as the conclusion that “through deep faith and constant mindfulness, her followers constantly strive to conduct their businesses in ways beneficial to all stakeholders” (130). Other scholars, looking at similar forms of spiritual “service,” for example, highlight how such language can facilitate gendered capitalism (Ganga Kieffer) and the repackaging of neoliberalism within alternative spiritualities (Crockford 205). To some degree, this is an emic/etic problem in Religious Studies, exemplified by the McCutcheon/Osri debate (see McCutcheon).

The above critique speaks to a broader difference between scholarship on “Buddhist economics” that seeks alternatives to capitalism and descriptive scholarship on “Buddhism and economics” that ethnographically tracks quotidian expressions of Buddhism within capitalist frameworks. This approach is evident in chapter seven, by Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg. The author analyzes Ladakhi monastics raising money through transnational fundraising and business ventures. Much like the branding of “Divine Dharamsala” and the Dalai Lama as a “brand ambassador” (Christopher 50), Ladakh is heavily dependent on tourism, and Buddhism is a “Unique Selling Proposition” central to advertising campaigns. Entrepreneurial monks practice “connectionwork” to generate profit within a perceived ethical framework that spreads the *Dharma* to non-Buddhists by means of ritual performance and establishes interpersonal relationships

of karmic significance. In the short term, such connectionwork that is premised on Ladakhi monks doing costly international tours may run a financial loss; but in the long run, networks are solidified for future fundraising, for foreigners to visit Ladakhi monasteries, and for the adaptation of Himalayan Buddhism to the conditions of global capitalism and the necessities of branding. The delayed benefit of connectionwork, driven by ritual performances such as those done during the Heart of the Himalayas tour in Europe, is described by Lama Norbu as a kind of spiritual Wi-Fi that initiated people automatically connect to when they're in range. This Wi-Fi connectivity "highlights how various causes and conditions create the pathways through which the connections to Buddhism become maintained and initiated" (138). Such connections and their profitability for specific Buddhist institutions may transpire in this or in future lifetimes.

A strength of this chapter is that it eschews the prescriptive modeling of Buddhist economic systems as a counterpoint to the evils of global capitalism. Many Buddhist businesses operate *within* the exigencies of capitalism, not as a sign of spiritual corruption but rather as a "sign of the expansion of the power, influence, and networks of Buddhist leaders and institutions" (134). This accounts for an increasingly popular business model that blurs profit-making ideologies (both financial value and spiritual merit), Buddhist branding, and spiritual tourism in places like Ladakh. More personally, it presciently articulates my own experience. I first experienced Himalayan Buddhism as a 17-year-old when I bought a ticket to see touring Gyuto monks at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City. At the time, I had little idea about Buddhism and no idea about the Gyuto monks' distinctive overtone chanting. But as their sonorous voices reverberated throughout the neo-Gothic nave, my "Wi-Fi connectivity" (to borrow the language of Lama Norbu) popped on. Two years later I was in Tibet; jump forward to the present, and I have spent several years in Tibetan areas of South Asia, including Ladakh, and head the Buddhism and Economy research cluster at the University of Copenhagen. In short, the "connectionwork" worked! My only quibble with the chapter is that the analysis focuses on the financial benefits of orientalist branding

of Himalayan Buddhism and does not consider the psychological harm of subalterns (tribals, refugees, and other mountain peoples) being dependent on New Age Orientalism and cultural mimesis for their livelihood (Lopez “New Age Orientalism”; Lopez *Prisoners of Shangri-La*; Prost).

The varied ethnographic chapters are generally strong and thematically unified. Most chapters are suitable for an undergraduate course on the anthropology of Buddhism. The volume concludes with three theoretical chapters which nicely bring together several of the themes of the book. One area in which I would have liked further explication is the discussion in the introduction about the “corporate form of religion” (McLaughlin et al.). The authors propose a distinction between “Corporations C” (large capitalist companies) and “Corporations G” (professional guilds), but the distinction remains unclear and unutilized throughout the volume (11). Even so, this book is a strong addition to the corpus of Buddhism and economics (Brox and Williams-Oerberg; Caple and Roddy), a rapidly growing field with many dynamic theoretical debates and under-researched ethnographic contexts.

Works Cited

- Appadurai, Arjun. “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.” *Public Culture*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1990, pp. 1-24.
- Brox, Trine, and Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg, editors. *Buddhism and Business: Merit, Material Wealth, and Morality in the Global Market Economy*. University of Hawai’i Press, 2020.
- Caple, Jane, and Sarah Roddy. “The Stakes of Religious Fundraising: Economic Transition and Religious Resurgence in Irish Catholicism and Tibetan Buddhism.” *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 17 Oct. 2022. Taylor & Francis Online, doi:10.1080/17530350.2022.2098514.

Christopher, Stephen. "Divergent Refugee and Tribal Cosmopolitanism in Dharamshala." *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2020, pp. 31-54.

Crockford, Susannah. "What Do Jade Eggs Tell Us about the Category 'Esotericism'? Spirituality, Neoliberalism, Secrecy, and Commodities." In *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, Brill, 2021, pp. 201-216.

Gaitanidis, Ioannis. *Spirituality and Alternativity in Contemporary Japan: Beyond Religion?* Bloomsbury, 2022.

Ganga Kieffer, Kira. "Manifesting Millions: How Women's Spiritual Entrepreneurship Genders Capitalism." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2020, pp. 80-104.

Hutt, Michael. *Unbecoming Citizens: Culture, Nationhood, and the Flight of Refugees from Bhutan*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Jansen, Berthe. *The Monastery Rules: Buddhist Monastic Organization in Pre-Modern Tibet*. University of California Press, 2018.

Lopez, Donald S., Jr. "New Age Orientalism: The Case of Tibet." *Tricycle*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1994, pp. 36-43.

_____. *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.

McCutcheon, Russell T. "'It's a Lie. There's No Truth in It! It's a Sin!': On the Limits of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from Themselves." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 74, no. 3, 2006, pp. 720-750.

McLaughlin, Levi, et al. "Why Scholars of Religion Must Investigate the Corporate Form." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 88, no. 3, 2020, pp. 693-725.

Prost, Audrey. "The Problem with 'Rich Refugees': Sponsorship, Capital, and the Informal Economy of Tibetan Refugees." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2006, pp. 233-253.

Reader, Ian. "Secularisation, R.I.P.? Nonsense! The 'Rush Hour Away from the Gods' and the Decline of Religion in Contemporary Japan." *Journal of Religion in Japan*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 7-36.