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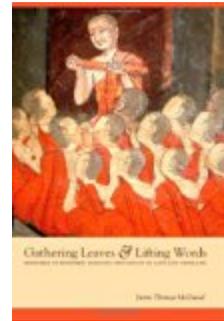
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Justin Thomas McDaniel. *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand*. Critical Dialogues in Southeast Asian Studies Series. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008. 358 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98848-1; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98849-8.

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Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand?

Historians of Buddhism and scholars of Southeast Asian textual culture will benefit considerably from Justin Thomas McDaniel's first book, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words*. Drawing on manuscript and print materials from what we now call Laos and Thailand, this ambitious study (which was developed from the author's Harvard dissertation) proposes that Buddhist commentarial texts, sermon guides, and handbooks be studied with an eye to their pedagogical use. According to McDaniel, this perspective on Buddhist curricula reveals unexpected continuities in Buddhist textual practice, despite the twentieth-century rise of mass-produced printed texts and heightened Siamese/Thai state control over monastic education and administration from the later nineteenth century onward. In addition to developing this central argument, McDaniel offers in passing many valuably suggestive comments on specific texts and manuscripts, and on Thai/Lao monastic practice.

McDaniel's introduction proposes key analytical terms used throughout: "languaging," "curriculum," and "vernacular landscape." Drawing on Alton Becker's *Beyond Translation: Essays Toward a Modern Philology* (1995), McDaniel suggests that the Lao/Thai commentarial genres he examines are fruitfully seen as instances of "languaging," or reshaping older texts known from memory in new contexts. *Nissaya*, *vohāra*, and *nāmasadda* denote Thai/Northern Thai/Lao vernacular language texts that respond to Pāli Buddhist textual content (sometimes,

but not always, drawn from the *tipiṭaka* and its Pāli commentarial apparatuses), through forms of gloss and/or verbal commentary. Central to all three of these commentarial genres is the practice of *yok sab* (Thai), which McDaniel translates as "lifting words." The process of "lifting words" in the production of commentarial texts, and also of sermons rooted in these texts, reveals instances of "languaging." The commentarial texts produced and used in a particular place and time shed light on the "curriculum" developed there. McDaniel emphasizes the individuality and particularity of curriculum development, often describing curricular and commentarial choices as "idiosyncratic." Curricula are part of the "vernacular landscape" characterizing any given corner of the Buddhist world. McDaniel recasts the work of J. B. Jackson on environmental history (*Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* [1986]) in order to note the complex affective and relational lived environment within which curricula are formed and function. In doing so, McDaniel also draws on French studies of reading practice by Michel de Certeau and Roger Chartier. The former's emphasis on small-scale transgression and tactical behavior seems to resonate with McDaniel's emphasis on the idiosyncrasy and individuality of commentarial authors and preachers. McDaniel's introduction also makes clear his intent to place his work within revisionist histories of Thailand, which, over the last several decades, have sought to question monarchist and celebratory accounts of Siam's/Laos's/Thailand's road to modernity.

Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words is an extended argument against those who see the educational and monastic administrative reforms of the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Siamese/Thai state as having transformed Siamese/Thai/Lao Buddhist practice and epistemology.

Chapter 1 offers a valuable overview of Buddhist education in what we now call Laos, from the French colonial period to the present day. The Lao focus of this chapter signals another aspect of McDaniel's work of particular interest to scholars of Thailand and Southeast Asia; McDaniel is keen to emphasize Lao/Northern Thai Buddhist textual and institutional histories since Buddhist materials and histories from this region (especially from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) have often been neglected in favor of a focus on central Thailand or Cambodia and Vietnam. Chapter 1 is usefully read as a counterpoint to recent work by Anne Hansen (*How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860-1930* [2007]) and Penny Edwards (*Cambodge, The Cultivation of a Nation 1860-1945* [2008]). Discussing French scholarly and Buddhist monastic connections between Laos and other parts of Indochina during the French colonial period, McDaniel argues that French impact on Buddhist textual culture in what we now call Laos was relatively modest.

In chapter 2, McDaniel focuses on manuscript materials from Chiang Mai (now in northern Thailand), suggesting characteristics of textual production and preaching culture in the Thai/Lao region prior to Siamese state reforms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This chapter contains many fascinating details for scholars of Buddhism in the northern Thai/Lao region, drawing productively on monastic biographical narratives and legends of famous monks and temples, bringing to life a world of mobile monks and "wandering librarians." This account helps one understand the processes through which shared textual emphases and practices developed in the north. Moreover, this chapter advances McDaniel's larger concerns by bringing the study of curriculum to an individual scale: curricula are the product of texts and sermons crafted by monks, who shape the content and use of Thai/Lao commentarial genres.

Chapter 3, "Kings and Universities," provides an overview of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Siamese/Thai state moves to centralize the *saṅgha* and to bring monastic education within Bangkok's tighter embrace. McDaniel includes useful details about how these processes played out in northern Thailand, includ-

ing a discussion of the monastic educational center at Wat Chedi Luang in Chiang Mai. McDaniel here intensifies his engagement with scholarly work on the "modernization" of Siamese/Thai Buddhism, arguing that foundational scholarship on this topic has taken a misleadingly Bangkok-centered view of monastic administration and education. McDaniel emphasizes the numbers of monks who effectively remained outside the framework of state-organized Buddhist education, residing in rural monasteries and/or not taking part in government-run monastic examinations. Moreover, he suggests that even monks who participate within the new textual and examination practices of the state (with their greater post-nineteenth-century emphasis on Pāli *tipiṭaka* texts) may sustain the long-standing commentarial, pedagogical, and sermonic practices that characterize(d) vernacular landscapes formed by "lifting words." Usefully, McDaniel proposes that those interested in comparative studies of modernity look closely at continuities and discontinuities in what he calls "epistemic flows" and examine the choices made by "intellectual agents" (p. 98).

In the fourth chapter—which will be of considerable interest to those working on Buddhist commentary and multilingual textual practices of southern Asia, whether or not they share McDaniel's wider interest in problems of centralization, standardization, and modernization—McDaniel takes readers into the heart of the practice of "lifting words," explaining the content and structure of texts called *nissaya*, *vohāra*, and *nāmasadda*. Cautioning that thus-denominated texts cannot be neatly differentiated as genres—manuscripts labeled in terms of any of these may share features of the others—McDaniel explores these commentarial manuscripts as instances of the "selective appropriation and re-application of Pali" (p. 121). Despite the blurring of genres and genre labels, he identifies *nāmasadda* manuscripts as generally distinguished by word-by-word glosses, while *vohāra* manuscripts introduce short passages of Pāli followed by more extended elaboration or commentarial flight. *Nissayas* generally include a combination of glossing and commentarial elaboration, with considerable repetition of a limited number of Pāli terms. McDaniel emphasizes that these manuscripts served as notes toward lectures and sermons, thus stressing the monastic pedagogical context for the production and use of these commentarial genres; these "served as detailed outlines to lectures or performances expanded on in performance," and they reveal considerable diversity across even the northern Thai/Lao region (pp. 127, 130). This chapter includes several examples drawn from manuscripts, and a discussion

of the implications of orthography for our understanding of textual practice in the region.

Chapters 5 and 6 treat the transition from manuscripts to contemporary Thai Buddhist print culture, and consequently new expressions of the commentarial genres discussed in chapter 4. While there is, according to McDaniel, no evidence of the written or printed production of these genres after 1920 in Laos or northern Thailand, he argues in these chapters that their commentarial *modes* are maintained in a variety of contemporary texts and textual practices. Thus, McDaniel sees the *vohāra* mode present in a variety of handbooks and notebooks used by teachers and as guides to sermons, while both the *nissaya* and *vohāra* modes are reflected in printed sermon texts referred to in Thai as *desanā*. Monastic textbooks and examination handbooks, as well as a bilingual prose form called *roi kaeo*, also reflect the influence of earlier commentarial practice. McDaniel stresses the nonstandardized and unstable character of canons formed through the handbooks and notebooks that thus treat *tipiṭaka* and other Pāli textual materials.

Using a study of *Dhammapada* texts in contemporary Thailand, chapter 7 complicates the view that the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed a fundamental alteration of Thai Buddhist textuality, with an increasing focus on texts of the Pāli *tipiṭaka*, the diminished authority of non-*tipiṭaka* narratives, and novel forms of textual interpretation. McDaniel argues that, while the case of *Dhammapada* publication and articulation on television frequently reflects an altered orientation in content—emphasizing *Dhammapada* verses rather than commentarial narratives—monastic sermons and handbooks reveal the continuing nonstandardized life of *Dhammapada* narratives in monastic practice and the ongoing presence of the commentarial style of “lifting words.” In doing so, he makes the important point that attempts to chart continuities and changes in the history of Buddhist education should compare contextually similar textual forms and practices in the attempt to discern how texts and ideas were brought to life within curricula at particular times and places. Chapter 8 offers another example of the continued vitality of nonstandardized Thai commentary on Pāli *tipiṭaka* texts, focusing on the shifting and partial commentarial attention to sections of the *abhidhamma* and the central place of such texts in funerary ritual. The conclusion contains many interesting comments and suggestions for further research; I would emphasize McDaniel’s suggestion that scholars of Buddhist education do more to explore the relationships be-

tween monastic lineage and curriculum.

Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words is a rich and often fascinating treatment of Buddhist monastic textual culture and bilingual commentary in the Siamese/Thai/Lao region, reflecting the author’s long personal acquaintance with Lao/Thai monastic institutions and educational practice. An exciting and productive feature of McDaniel’s work is his ability to combine ethnographic description with the close reading of textual forms, and to read across the divide between Buddhist manuscript and print cultures. The depth of his acquaintance with contemporary Lao/Thai Buddhist and monastic life has made it natural for him to read the textual record of earlier periods with considerable reference to contemporary monastic pedagogy and homiletics, productively shedding light on the possible use of textual materials now temporally distant. Sometimes, however, this movement between present and past proceeds with undue fluidity. It is entirely possible (and I think likely) that many commentarial manuscripts historically served the pedagogical functions attributed to them by McDaniel; however, this cannot be assumed on the basis of contemporary practice or the commentarial form of the manuscripts themselves. Tighter connections might perhaps be drawn between these manuscripts and the institutional evidence of Thai/Lao monasticism discussed in chapters 2 and 3, anchoring McDaniel’s discussions of the relationship between commentary, pedagogy, and curriculum more precisely in historical time. More sustained attention to colophons might also more clearly support McDaniel’s argument *against* the view that some of these texts were copied for merit-making purposes, outside a pedagogical context. I suspect that a fuller treatment of the wider textual world within which the *nissaya*, *vohāra*, and *nāmasadda* genres were situated would also be fruitful, possibly strengthening McDaniel’s claims about the structure and function of these commentarial texts.

Another feature of this study deserving of further reflection is McDaniel’s repeated emphasis on the idiosyncrasy and individuality characteristic of these commentarial and commentarial-modal texts (historical manuscripts as well as contemporary handbooks, etc.) and their authors. McDaniel’s point that this northern Thai/Lao regional manuscript record shows considerable internal diversity and instability is well taken, and should be of comparative interest to scholars working on commentarial genres and compendia from other parts of the southern Asian Buddhist world, including times and places in which commentarial content appears to have been more stable. McDaniel’s arguments for the *creative*

idiosyncrasy of scribes and authors (e.g., pp. 15, 120-1, 200, 226) and his framing of nonstandard commentarial and commentarial-modal practice as evidence of (conscious or unconscious) *resistance* (e.g., pp. 18, 191, 203, 248) to institutional centralization or epistemic pressure are more complex; readers lacking McDaniel's familiarity with the textual record would benefit from rather more in the way of close comparative readings of commentarial and handbook exempla. Seeing more clearly the elements that vary from one scribal or authorial treatment

to another, and how they relate to the structure of particular manuscripts or texts as well as to evidence (such as the orthographic) of a scribe's level of skill and education, would likely strengthen and nuance McDaniel's claims for the individual creativity characteristic of authors and teachers within Thai/Lao vernacular landscapes. It is, of course, a compliment to the author that readers would seek even more access to the textual worlds he knows so well.

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