



Jack Meng-Tat Chia. *Monks in Motion: Buddhism and Modernity across the South China Sea.* American Academy of Religion Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Illustrations. 300 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-009097-5.

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“Theravādins are not the only Buddhists in Southeast Asia.”[1]

Jack Meng-Tat Chia’s first book engages with the scholarly discussion on international networks of Chinese Buddhism and makes a groundbreaking contribution to this recent and thriving field through the introduction of the new concept of “South China Sea Buddhism.” In deploying this concept, the author identifies the forms of Buddhism in maritime Southeast Asia that make use of Mandarin Chinese, southern Chinese dialects, and/or Southeast Asian languages in their liturgy and practices, resulting from the encounter of preexisting Chinese religious environments with Buddhists arriving from mainland China. The majority of the Buddhist population in the area under scrutiny—the southern part of the Malay Archipelago, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore—is ethnic Chinese, migrated from China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Monks in Motion: Buddhism and Modernity across the South China Sea* is the first monograph telling the story of how Chinese migration led to the emergence of Buddhist communities in maritime Southeast Asia. As a result, it also offers new perspectives on the history of modern Chinese Buddhism. In a

nutshell, while previous studies have already pointed out the South Asian networks of modern Chinese Buddhism, the book under review offers a sophisticated analysis of the connected history of the Buddhist communities in China and the lesser-known Buddhist communities in maritime Southeast Asia, uncovering the role of overseas Chinese practitioners in the propagation and innovation of Chinese Buddhism in China and abroad.

The book begins with the story of the author encountering a monk “dressed in Chinese Mahāyāna-style robes on the inside with Theravāda-style saffron robes draped over his shoulders” (p. 1). This episode immediately confronts the reader with the unconventional topic under inquiry. The useful introductory pages include a review of the existing scholarship and present the main analytical concepts that build up the theoretical framework of the book, such as Buddhist modernism, Chinese Buddhism, and Southeast Asian Buddhism. The book’s five parts are organized chronologically. Chapter 1 provides the historical and cultural background of maritime Southeast Asia and China. Chapters 2 through 4 focus each on the life and career of one of the main figures in the book who represent three dif-

ferent aspects of the multifaceted forms of Buddhism in the South China Sea. Chuk Mor (Zhumo 竺摩, 1913–2002), Yen Pei (Yanpei 演培, 1917–96), and Ashin Jinarakkhita (Tizheng 體正, 1923–2002) are three pivotal figures in the development of institutional Buddhism in the area. Covering a period from the first decades of the twentieth century to the early twenty-first century, these core chapters offer the first English biography of the three prominent monks and provide an insight into previously unexplored varieties of Buddhist modernism. In the coda, the author touches on contemporary developments and addresses research issues that are not covered in his book.

As a historian of the institutional and intellectual history of maritime Southeast Asian Buddhism, as he describes himself, Chia combines a variety of historical sources, ranging from collected works (whose contents are appropriately listed in the appendixes), archival documents, commemorative texts, temple publications, epigraphic materials, and Buddhist periodicals. In addition, his approach is also based on multi-sited fieldwork across Southeast Asia, China, and Taiwan, allowing for the collection of oral history interviews and other ethnographic material.

In chapter 1, “Migrants, Monks, and Monasteries,” the author explores the beginning of institutional Buddhism in maritime Southeast Asia. The chapter provides a description of the ritualistic form of Buddhism practiced by Chinese local communities throughout the nineteenth century, when Chinese monks were mainly ritual specialists, operating in temples run by businessmen, and often housing a mix of Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist deities, a typical aspect of late imperial Chinese religion. The development of institutional Buddhism was a slow but steady process that culminated in the late 1940s. The first wave of missionary monks who arrived at the end of the nineteenth century brought forms of institutionalization, which nevertheless did not reach the majority of the Chinese population. Interestingly for the case made in this

book, many of the migrant and traveling monks who arrived in the region during the first half of the twentieth century came from Xiamen, whose Nanputuo Monastery, under the guidance of Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947), had become a headquarters for the Chinese Buddhist modernism movement. Their arrival thus also resulted in the spread of Buddhist modernist ideas among the overseas Chinese population.

The connection between Buddhist modernism and Chinese migration in the formation of South China Sea Buddhism is well exemplified by the transnational career of Chuk Mor presented in chapter 2, “Scripting Malaysia’s Chinese Buddhism.” Chuk Mor, deemed the “father of Malaysian Chinese Buddhism,” was a student of Taixu at the Minnan Buddhist Institute in Nanputuo Monastery and at the Wuchang Buddhist Institute. In 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was founded, he refused to go back to China from his temporary residence in Macao; he first accepted a position in Hong Kong and, in 1954, moved to Southeast Asia. Chuk Mor’s teaching was heavily influenced by Taixu’s doctrine of Human Life Buddhism (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教), as can be inferred by his emphasis on the this-worldly practice of Buddhism, a pragmatic approach that proved particularly appealing to the overseas Chinese community. Chuk Mor created a number of Buddhist institutions for the promotion of his modernist understanding of “orthodox Buddhism” (*zhengxin fojiao* 正信佛教), including the first Buddhist seminar in postcolonial Malaysia. He also engaged in secular education and encouraged refuge-taking as a confirmation of one’s status as lay follower. These measures were crucial in undermining the existing local forms of Buddhism and advocating a new Malaysian Chinese Buddhist identity.

Chapter 3, “Humanistic Buddhism in the Chinese Diaspora,” examines the comparable biography of Yen Pei, who is celebrated as one of the four eminent monks of Singapore. Yen Pei studied

at the Minnan Buddhist Institute; he later moved to the Sino-Tibetan Institute in Chongqing, where he had his first encounter with the modernist monk Yinshun 印順 (1906–2005), whose interpretation of Humanistic Buddhism (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教) was to deeply influence Yen Pei's Buddhist views. In 1949, he joined the exodus of Buddhist monks to Taiwan. Between 1958 and 1964, he undertook three "Dharma propagation trips" to mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, which resulted both in interaction with Theravāda Buddhists and in the dissemination of Humanistic Buddhism in the area. In 1964, he was offered the abbotship at Leng Foong Bodhi Institute, the temple of his former teacher Cihang 慈航 (1895–1954) and settled in Singapore. Like Chuk Mor, in his attempt to contrast religious syncretism and create a new "orthodox" Buddhist identity, Yen Pei promoted Buddhist education and scholarship and encouraged the incorporation of religious practice into everyday life. He further prompted Buddhist social engagement and, in his later years, significantly increased his worldly activism for social welfare.

Chapter 4, "Neither Mahāyāna nor Theravāda," explores the case of Ashin Jinarakkhita, a Peranakan Chinese born in Indonesia who studied in the Netherlands. Unlike Chuk Mor and Yen Pei, he was not exposed to any Buddhist seminars in China, and his modernist views were inspired by his involvement in the Theosophical Society. Upon his return to Indonesia, he received Chinese novice ordination. He later took Theravāda ordination under the Burmese monk Mahāsi Sayādaw (1904–82), a founding figure of the Burmese *vipassanā* movement. On an institutional level, Ashin Jinarakkhita established a lay Buddhist organization and a Sangha community. He also started female ordination of *bhikṣuṇīs*. A hybrid form of Buddhism, his Buddhayāna includes both Chinese and Theravāda doctrines and practices; it was conceived as an inclusive nonsectarian movement for both Chinese and indigenous

people. Ashin Jinarakkhita put his global modernist ideas at the service of local needs. To please the Indonesian government and safeguard Buddhism in the world's biggest Islamic state, he embraced the national discourse of "unity in diversity" and later promoted the controversial concept of Sang Hyang Ādi-Buddha, "the God Primordial Buddha," presented as the Buddhist version of an almighty God. In sum, by reconnecting the Buddhayāna with the Buddhism of the premodern maritime Hindu-Buddhist Indonesian kingdom, he prevented its becoming labeled a "Chinese" religion and strategically promoted it as a multiethnic minority religion in the postcolonial Indonesian state.

Titled "Monks in Motion," the coda takes us down to the contemporary era by discussing the political appropriation of the idea of a Pan-Buddhist union by the mainland Chinese government for the purposes of legitimizing its claims over the South China Sea. Chia points to the irony of this narrative, considering that the exodus of Chinese monks to the region was in many cases a consequence of the establishment of the communist regime. Nonetheless, as the author demonstrates convincingly, in the modern era the South China Sea has been—and still is—not merely a thriving zone in terms of economic exchanges but also a flourishing area for transregional religious circulations.

The primary contribution of the present volume lies in its creation of the very concept of "South China Sea Buddhism," which also allows for a reconfiguration of the conventional categories of both "modern Chinese Buddhism" and "South-east Asian Buddhism." Most scholarship on Buddhism during the Republic of China—a field that has received considerable attention in recent decades—adopts a China-centered perspective, often disregarding the transnational dimension. As a matter of fact, in recent years a number of scholars have begun to conceive of globalization as a major aspect of modern Chinese Buddhism, focusing on the cross-border interactions between mon-

astics and laity in China and abroad in the process. This book draws on those few but significant studies and introduces previously unexplored material.[2] Furthermore, the three case studies of Chuk Mor, Yen Pei, and Ashin Jinarakkhita also serve another argument made by Chia, namely, that the overseas Buddhist Chinese community had an active role in the development of Chinese Buddhism, in contrast to Holmes Welch's claims about their allegedly apathetic attitude.[3]

Chia's study also fills a gap in Southeast Asian religious studies, which is traditionally bifurcated in the field into mainland Theravāda Buddhism, on the one hand, and maritime Islam and Catholicism, on the other. The identification of Southeast Asian Buddhism with the Theravāda tradition owes to the academic boundaries between scholars trained in Southeast Asian studies and in East Asian studies. The study of Buddhism in Southeast Asia is mainly a target of the former category of scholars, who miss the linguistic and cultural knowledges to cope with Chinese Buddhist texts, rituals, and practices. Departing from this perspective, the book under review urges scholars to extend the study of Southeast Asian Buddhism beyond the Theravāda communities on the mainland and succeeds in identifying Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism in the maritime region as an important aspect of the local religious landscape.

Chia's book also makes an important contribution to our understanding of Buddhist modernism, which the author uses as a lens to analyze South China Sea Buddhism. Building on the works of Ann Ruth Hansen (*How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860–1930* [2007]) and David L. McMahan (*The Making of Buddhist Modernism* [2008]), the author shows how monks such as Chuk Mor, Yen Pei, and Ashin Jinarakkhita made the maritime Southeast Asian region an incubator of novel forms of Buddhist modernism. Their views of Buddhism reveal a quest for "orthodoxy" in the scriptures, but they also entail the assertion of religious and national peculiarities,

thus reflecting both the legacy of global trends and the impact of the local postcolonial background. Chuk Mor and Yen Pei received monastic training at Buddhist seminaries in China, where they were exposed to the modernist ideas of Taixu and Yinshun, respectively. Ashin Jinarakkhita, on the other hand, derived his vision of Buddhism from his engagement with the Theosophical Society. Whatever their origins, the same modernist views were employed by the three masters in their creation of a maritime Southeast Asian Buddhist identity. Ultimately, the three cases clarify that Buddhist modernism may be shaped by a combination of transnational networks and local circumstances.

Another topic addressed by Chia concerns the encounters between Chinese Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism in the modern era. The example of Yen Pei testifies to the creation of a dialogue between the two Buddhist traditions in terms that became possible only after a modern understanding of Buddhism as a unified Pan-Asian religion gained ground. Additionally, as the case of Ashin Jinarakkhita shows, this process eventually led to the emergence of forms of Buddhist hybridity, a field that has only recently attracted the interest of scholars—including me—who will greatly benefit from taking stock of Chia's case studies.[4]

This well-researched and well-documented monograph leaves only a few questions untreated. They are addressed by the author himself in the coda and skillfully presented as directions for future research. First, among the areas deserving further attention is the possible impact Chinese monks traveling to South and Southeast Asia in search of the "original" teachings of Śākyamuni had on modernist Theravāda Buddhism. While scholars have recognized the influence of the Theravāda model on the developments of modern East Asian Buddhism, it is fair to assume, as suggested by Chia, that the opposite may also have happened.[5] Second, studies about Chinese religions in Southeast Asia reveal the resilience and

liveliness of syncretic forms of practice in local Chinese temples.[6] One wonders how much of the ritualistic forms of Buddhism survived in the area under scrutiny and to what extent they were affected by the new institutional forms of Buddhism. [7]

Monks in Motion is an engaging study that will appeal to students and scholars of Southeast Asian studies and Chinese studies, as well as those of Asian history and religious studies. In my view, this is compulsory reading for scholars with an interest in modern Chinese Buddhism and in the modern religious landscape of Southeast Asia. Quoting the author, “by crossing the artificial spatial frontier between China and Southeast Asia, this study brings Southeast Asia into the study of Chinese Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism into the study of Southeast Asian Buddhism” (pp. 155–56).

Notes

[1]. Justin Thomas McDaniel, “Buddhists in Modern Southeast Asia,” *Religion Compass* 4, no. 11 (2010): 659, quoted by Chia, 156.

[2]. Notably, Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, “The Globalization of Chinese Buddhism: Clergy and Devotee Networks in the Twentieth Century,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 65, no. 2 (2006): 337–59.

[3]. Holmes Welch, *The Buddhist Revival in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 190–93.

[4]. See for example, Tzu-Lung Chiu, “Chinese Mahāyāna Monastics in Contemporary Myanmar: Rejection, Accommodation, Assimilation,” in *Exploring the Life and Teachings of Mahayana Buddhists in Asia*, ed. Ampere Tseng (New York: Nova Science Publishers), 213–78; Wei-Yi Cheng, “Theravādzizing Ghost Festival in Taiwan,” *Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 13, no. 2 (2012): 281–99; and Ngar-Sze Lau, “Modernising Buddhism: Emergence of Theravāda Meditation Communities in Contemporary China” (PhD diss., Lancaster University, 2017).

[5]. Notably, Richard M. Jaffe, *Seeking Śākyamuni: South Asia in the Formation of Modern Japanese Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); and Justin R. Ritzinger, “Original Buddhism and Its Discontents: The Chinese Buddhist Exchange Monks and the Search for the Pure Dharma in Ceylon,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 44, no. 2 (2016): 149–73. See also Ester Bianchi, “Understanding *jīelü* 戒律: Resurgence and Reconfiguration of *Vinaya*-Related Concepts in Modern China,” in *Critical Concepts and Methods for the Study of Chinese Religions*, vol. 2, *Intellectual History of Key Concepts*, ed. Gregory Adam Scott, and Stefania Travagnin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 54–80.

[6]. A recent example for referencing maritime Southeast Asia is Fabian Graham, *Voices from the Underworld: Chinese Hell Deity Worship in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

[7]. This very question is at the core of the recently published book by Lee Ooi Tan, *Buddhist Revitalization and Chinese Religions in Malaysia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020). See also Kenneth Dean, “Whose Orders? Chinese Popular God Temple Networks and the Rise of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist Monasteries in Southeast Asia,” in *Buddhist and Islamic Orders in Southern Asia: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. R. Michael Feener and Anne M. Blackburn (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2018), 99–124.

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