

Business Practices in Southeast Asia: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Theravada Buddhist Countries

SCOTT A. HIPsher

London: Routledge, 2010, 207p.

Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society

JULIANE SCHOBER

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011, 248p.

An image come to mind when talking about Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia: devout monks who dwell in the remote wilderness or forest dwellings and care no more about the secular world. *Business Practices in Southeast Asia* by Scott A. Hipsher and *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar* by Juliane Schober succeed in re-examining something we think we know about the Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia (i.e., Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand), and providing readers with a better understanding of the four countries in which Theravada Buddhism has significant economic and political power.

Business Practices in Southeast Asia explores the cultural features that are influenced by Theravada Buddhism in entrepreneurial behavior and business practice in these four countries. This book has 12 chapters. Chapters 1–2 overview Theravada Buddhists and the impact of Theravada Buddhism in the four countries. In Hipsher's words, Theravada Buddhism does "bind the nations together in a way that makes this a distinctly recognizable region" (Hipsher, p. 16). Chapters 3–6 successively examine the extent to which companies in the four countries are influenced by Theravada Buddhism. Chapters 7–10 explore features of companies in Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, such as business strategies, tactical management, marketing, finance, labor relations, and so on. In the final two chapters, Hipsher stresses the interconnections that exist between secular politics and Theravada Buddhism, and then predicts future trends. In the words of Hipsher, companies in the four countries of Theravada Buddhism will "continue to be influenced by Theravada Buddhist values," while "increasingly use globally available technology" (Hipsher, p. 179).

The most significant contribution of this book is that it reveals five distinctive features in the Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist societies: (1) they are hierarchical, but paternalistic; (2) flexible; (3) possess a low level of control; (4) practice moderation and pragmatism (taking the middle path); and (5) focus on the individual (Hipsher, p. 30).

In the view of Hipsher, in contrast with impersonal strategic management in the West (e.g., human resource management and labor relations), many companies in the Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia are family owned; in other words, "there is no separation between

ownership and management” (Hipsher, p. 48). Hipsher concludes that these local companies are more personalized, relationship-oriented, and less bureaucratic, in contrast with those in the West. However, with non-core operational business practices (e.g., accounting, billing, and shipping), there is a higher level of convergence with international practices.

Theravada Buddhists believe that souls transmigrate and *kamma* gained in precious lives determines the social order in the present. Therefore, Theravada Buddhists generally accept the legitimacy of rulers and employers, because they assumed the individuals “earned a significant amount of *kamma* in previous lives” (Hipsher, p. 151). So it’s not surprising that companies in these societies are characterized by patron-client relations and values that follow a “middle path.”

Patron-client relations are common throughout Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia. Within these relations, employees believing in *kamma* “readily accept differences in power and wealth” (Hipsher, p. 125). At the same time, the patron (employer) does provide “both tangible and intangible benefits to one’s clients in order to retain their respect and loyalty” (Hipsher, p. 120), such as preferring personal relations in hiring and training employees.

According to the “middle path” value of Theravada Buddhism, “success is important but does not necessarily mean unlimited growth and expansion” (Hipsher, p. 77). In daily practice, the “middle path” means “to be serious in one’s work and studies, but not too serious, and to ensure one also enjoys one’s life” (Hipsher, p. 27). Following this value, most Buddhist employees prioritize low-stress workplace, rather than pursuing material possessions.

Alongside Hipsher’s thought-provoking book, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar* by Juliane Schober focuses on the “conjunctures” between Theravada Buddhism and secular politics in Myanmar from pre-colonial seventeenth to early twenty-first century. An attached chronology and exhaustive notes improve the readability of this book to some degree.

Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar has eight chapters. The first two chapters contextualize the conjunctures between Buddhism and different realms in the pre-colonial (including the three Anglo-Burmese Wars) and colonial eras, while highlighting the construction of Buddhist rationalism as an essential push factor that relied on and used Buddhism moral and political leverage to challenge the government.

Based on personal fieldwork in Myanmar since 1980, Schober’s core argument is to question the Weberian narrative of “otherworldly” Buddhism (Schober, p. 10). In her opinion, “Buddhist public acts performed by monks and laity in Buddhist societies are simultaneously—and necessarily—political and religious” (Schober, p. 20). In addition, Schober discovers a lesser-known fact: the Sangha has not been uniform for a long time. Due to the decline of Buddhist education and different attitudes toward politics, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Sangha experienced fragmentation, leading to many factions developing different attitudes toward the politicization of religion. It’s not surprising that some Buddhist factions were employed by modern domestic movements to “resist the power of the state” (Schober, p. 14), while other Buddhists

factions provided the State Law and Order Restoration Council (1988–97) with legitimacy through religious means. In the early twentieth century, the Young Men’s Buddhist Association was initially supported by the colonial government. This is obviously contrary to the Weberian description of Buddhism as otherworldly.

Chapter 3 contextualizes the colonial reaction toward Buddhism. In the case of Buddhist education, colonial education itself hastened the decline of Buddhist education, which no longer retained its “privileged status it commanded prior to the British presence” (Schober, p. 13). Though successive governments allowed monasteries to offer basic education, coverage was limited in rural areas.

Chapters 4–5 highlight how since the early 1900s, some lay Buddhist associations tried to change traditional Buddhist practices and develop Buddhist nationalism, specifically elite lay organizations such as the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) that advocated “civil Buddhism under colonial domination” (Schober, p. 72).

In the pro-colonial era, successive governments (e.g., U Nu Government in the years 1948 to 1962, Ne Win Government in the years 1962 to 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council [1988–97], and the State Peace and Development Council [1997–2010]) tried to control the monastic community (particularly the Buddhist Sangha), its doctrines, and its social influence. For example, they championed Buddhist nationalism to consolidate their legitimacy in ruling Myanmar. As a result of this, many young monks were mobilized, but many members of the Sangha remained silent.

In Chapters 6–7, Schober analyzes the political realities to show how “the legitimization political authority remains entrenched in the political divisions” (Schober, p. 117). In the case of the “Saffron Revolution” of 2007, the struggles between the Sangha and the military regime revealed conflicting visions of moral authority held by the monks. Many participated in the government’s “administrative structures in a perfunctory way” (Schober, p. 108). At the same time, some “provided logistical support for widespread anti-government mobilization, relayed information through an internal monastic network, and even stepped up to administer some judicial and civil infrastructure” (Schober, p. 107).

Chapter 8 concludes by predicting the direction of future conjunctures between the Sangha and secular politics. As Schober concludes, partnership between the Sangha and the state might maintain an “overwhelming social and political synergies,” while “their mutual contestations certainly harbor the potential for divisive conflicts” (Schober, p. 145).

Both *Business Practices in Southeast Asia* and *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar* provide valuable insights into the changes that Theravada Buddhism has wrought on both local politics and economy. Both books recognize that at present, several issues will remain unresolved. For instance, Schober believes that Buddhism has become “a really accessible source of power for supporters of the state as well as for those who contest, implicitly or overtly, the authority of the security of the secular state” (Schober, pp. 141–142). In the opinion of Hipsher, due to business

practices, outsiders in family-owned companies have limited opportunities for advancement, which often results in leaving their employers and seeking out better opportunities.

There is a common omission in the two books. Both show little concern about Buddhists' involvement in violence. In Hipsher's book, Buddhists' involvement in violence deviates from their beliefs in *kamma* and "middle way" values. In Schober's book, Buddhists' involvement in violence should be regarded as another expression of monastic resistance to the state. At present, Buddhist extremism is thriving in Myanmar, which is engaging in violence against Muslims. Radical Buddhist monks have been accused of spreading hate speech and fueling sectarian violence as was evident when the country was ravaged by anti-Muslim violence in 2012 and 2013, violence that left more than 200 people dead and tens of thousands homeless, mostly Muslims (Radio Free Asia 2014). In March 2014, Buddhist mobs even attacked international aid agencies over perceived pro-Rohingya bias, triggering a mass humanitarian withdrawal from Rakhine State (Integrated Regional Information Networks 2014). If the authors would consider Buddhists' involvement in violence, their arguments and predictions on the future trend will be more inclusive.

Rich in insights and elegant in presentation, both books are well documented and thoroughly researched. They represent a welcome and original contribution to the study of Theravada Buddhism, and offer new directions for future research. They are to be highly recommended to researchers, students, and practitioners alike who seek to gain both stimulating theoretical and more practical insights into Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia.

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To Nation by Revolution: Indonesia in the 20th Century

ANTHONY REID

Singapore: NUS Press, 2011, 348p.

To Nation by Revolution is a collection of articles written by Anthony Reid, who has been praised not only for his seminal book *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, but also for important works on diverse themes that have been critical in the formation of Indonesia. At first glance, the book