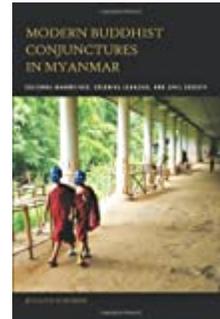


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Juliane Schober. *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. 248 pp. \$49.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-3382-4.



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Commissioned by Thomas Borchert (University of Vermont)

Written from the perspective of a little over two and a half decades of research and writing on Burma/Myanmar, Schober's book offers much for seasoned scholars and students alike. Developed in conversation with Burma studies scholars, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, Buddhist studies scholars, historians of religion, and political and cultural voices within Myanmar, the book constitutes an attempt to explain the relations of Buddhism, politics, and civil society in Myanmar from the seventeenth century through the monastic and lay protests of 2007. Schober's treatment is thus ultimately a historical anthropology of modern Myanmar, with special attention to the ways in which different people and groups have used, or resisted uses of, Buddhism in articulating and acting on their moral visions for the present and future.

Schober's main argument focuses on the implications of the relations between Buddhism, politics, and civil society for understanding the current political state of the country. She concludes that postcoloniality in Myanmar remains an aspiration yet to be achieved. Such a vision for the future requires civil institutions that allow a public discourse about power that can transcend the current tensions between Buddhism and the modern state (p. ix). By this, I believe that she means that

Buddhist values, discourses, and institutions, at least in terms of the vicissitudes considered in the book, have not yet produced the kind of civil institutions that are needed to propel Myanmar out of its past that, is out of the political and cultural legacies deriving from its disruptive encounter with British colonial power. Arguably for Schober the most important of these legacies is the continuing tension between Buddhism and the state—a tension in which complex interdependencies and antagonisms persist.

Schober builds her argument from a consideration of genealogies of hegemony and subjugation, patronage and resistance, and power and loss (p. 1). This she does in seven substantive chapters: precolonial Buddhist cultural hegemony, with particular attention to developments from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century (chapter 1); secularism and modernity in as much as they emerged during the colonial project (chapter 2); contestations related to colonial knowledge and Buddhist education (chapter 3); the construction of modern Buddhist identities during the colonial period, especially in regard to the Young Men's Buddhist Association (chapter 4); the efforts on the part of three governments after independence to control Buddhist institutions, doctrines, and practices (chapter 5); Buddhist resistances to the state

(chapter 6); and (an extended study of) the events of September 2007 when the world watched as stirring pictures and videos portrayed monks and lay people contesting the power and policies of the government (chapter 7).

At the analytical level, Schober welds her enterprise to an anti-Weberian agenda. Specifically, each chapter of the book undermines any claim of bifurcation between Buddhism and the political. This dovetails into a particular kind of methodological approach guided by the notion that we are well served not by assuming that true Buddhism is apolitical or "otherworldly" but rather by attending to the history or genealogies of Buddhist "conjunctures," that is, historical moments "when public discourse about Buddhism and politics fueled particular cultural debates" (p. 1). Such conjunctions entail encounters between Buddhist political rule and colonial power, between monastic and colonial modes of education (especially in regard to such topics as mathematics and map making), between traditional economies of merit and modern economic systems, and between Buddhist ethical thought and the violence of the state. And the cultural debates concern such topics as nationalism, the nature of monastic and lay education, the morality of the state, the significance of Buddhist ritual and Buddhist sacred places, the nature of monastic life, ethnic identity, otherness, secularism, civil society, and, ultimately, the constraints or limits competing moral views (e.g., of the state during the time of the military councils, of groups resisting the state) should or should not place on one another. This simultaneously analytical and methodological stance concerning "conjunctures" and cultural debates serves as a basic starting and ending point for the overall range of the each of the substantive chapters of the book. The slightly confusing matter at hand here is that the debates themselves are simultaneously intrinsic parts of the "conjunctures." But once the reader overcomes this analytical and methodological circularity, the straightforward nature of the method becomes clear. In other words, Schober is drawing our attention to historical convergences of Buddhism, culture, and politics, and also the significance of subsequent moral debates that emerge from these convergences.

In and of itself, arguing against Weber is not novel, and Schober herself is explicit about her intellectual debt to those who have crossed such waters before. However, starting from this interpretive stance, Schober impressively draws together a range of material focusing on moments of sociopolitical challenge and disarray, and what these moments, when viewed thematically over

time, help us to understand about the country, past and present. While suggesting, ultimately, that "the tensions of modernity" in Myanmar remain unresolved (p. 154), she stops short of arguing what Myanmar should become, acknowledges the continuing roles of Buddhist communities in shaping Myanmar's future, and closes by discussing Myanmar's potential futures (chapter 8), returning again to comment on, among other things, the role(s) of Buddhist communities in shaping Myanmar's future in the midst of "weak markers of civil society" (p. 149).

There are some areas where the book could provide additional analysis and expansion. Especially given the recent rise/resurgence of anti-Muslim movements in Myanmar, what really feels missing from the book is a chapter specifically focused on minority-related matters, from riots to marriage to religion, over time. This would seem to be a topic ideally suited to the kind of conjuncture/cultural debate analysis that Schober gives to the topics she does address. And, indeed, ethnic/minority matters are among the most pressing that Myanmar faces, particularly because of the unresolved need to effectively balance power and resources in a diverse land, even if most people are Buddhist and Burmese (in the sense of the national group). That said, her discussions about Buddhist maximalists (here she follows Bruce Lincoln in treating these as "those social groups who seek to subordinate matters of civil society and the authority of the state to religious principles," p. 172), situated within her larger consideration of modern Myanmar's Buddhist political histories, help us think about how some Buddhists in Myanmar perceive their actions in light of a need to protect Buddhism both inside the country and around the globe more generally.

Additionally, while the book does attend to traditional categories like *dhammarāja* (righteous ruler), there are traditional and modern Buddhist concepts that warrant further elaboration or clarification. It would be helpful, for instance, to learn more about how the term *paā'ivedha sāsana* (the Buddhist dispensation inasmuch as it is experienced as a fruit of study and practice) came to be understood as a "utopian vision of a Buddhist polity" (p. 27; also p. 45), and whether there are political implications for, or interpretations of, such terms as *pariyatti sāsana* (the dispensation as it is studied) and *paā'ipatti sāsana* (the dispensation as it is practiced).

Areas of development and expansion aside, Schober's book excels above all in its treatment of state uses of Buddhism, of Buddhist resistances to the state,

of civil efforts to use Buddhism for many different, often competing purposes; in short, of transitions and transformations of Buddhism in Myanmar from colonial times to the present. I find her distillation of the YMBA and its history particularly illuminating, and also the attention given to the different histories of Upper and Lower Burma as a result of the colonial project. Provocative is the implication that Myanmar needs strong civil institutions not limited by the political and cultural legacies of the past, set as they are within particular Buddhist frameworks. With the changes Myanmar has witnessed since the publication of this book only four years ago, we are perhaps witnessing that very kind of development, even as cultural narratives from the past remain strong.

This is essential reading for any consideration of Buddhism, politics, and civil society in Myanmar. The understanding of history and culture it offers is really quite different than, for instance, the understanding of Buddhist history and culture presented in a more recent (2012) historical study by Michael Aung-Thwin and Maitrii Aung-Thwin (e.g., especially in regard to the nature of the events in 1988 and 2007). In a graduate or undergraduate course this book can be very effectively paired, in part or in whole, with a number of materials dealing with Myanmar. Undergraduate students may be overwhelmed by the academic tone and language of Schober's text; however, it is clear from my experience of using it in the classroom that with appropriate guidance they can get much out of the book as well.

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