

BOOK REVIEWS

Figures of Buddhist Modernity in Asia. Edited by Jeffrey Samuels, Justin Thomas McDaniel, and Mark Michael Rowe. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 218 pages. Hardcover: ISBN 978-0-8248-5854-4.

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Despite the fact that most university courses now emphasize that there is diversity within the essentialist and monolithic label “Buddhism,” and that in many ways it is better to refer to “Buddhisms” (as has the latest edition of the volume by Robinson, Johnson, and Thanissaro, *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction*; Wadsworth, fifth edition, 2004), it is also important for students of Buddhism to seek out and engage with *individual* Buddhists where possible. This exercise often shatters any sense of knowing what the label of “being a Buddhist” means. These individuals can offer very specific insights into their own lives and, in some cases, may even introduce themselves as “not Buddhist,” or “non-Buddhist,” to eschew being labeled at all, due to the baggage and assumptions that such labeling brings. Even within a single community voices may vary radically and practitioners may point out that the Buddha was interested in “the truth about the way things are,” not something labeled “Buddhism.” And, of course, this kind of general observation on what practitioners might emphasize about their paths can be applied to other religious traditions as well.

Figures of Buddhist Modernity in Asia takes the individual lives of what it calls “everyday Buddhists” (p. 11) very seriously to focus on seventy (p. 9) women and men from a variety of traditions past and present. We might ask whether this emphasis on “everyday Buddhists” locates the work in the category of “subaltern studies,” but perhaps the introduction of another category was not the intention of the editors. These varied lives are presented by over sixty scholars, and the editors are to be congratulated on successfully putting together such a mammoth organizational task. The content emphasizes process, acting, and change, and is organized within four innovative sections: *looking back* to the invention of tradition in the modern world, *looking*

forward to social-psychological care in a troubled world, *looking inward* to the new asceticism in modern Buddhism, and *looking outward* as global citizens. I was not always sure about the appropriateness of the sections. One way around this issue when using this monograph in teaching would be to assign essay work asking how, in students' opinions, the case studies illustrate *looking back*, *looking forward*, *looking inward*, and *looking outward*. This would undoubtedly acknowledge a range of possible emphases contained within each of these categories.

As the content is intended to enrich and extend traditional surveys in the study of "Buddhisms," a list of which is provided in the last note on page 14 of the introduction, it is also helpful that there are listings giving the more traditional categories for reference. These are given by Buddhist traditions (Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana), and by region and country (East Asia: China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan; South Asia: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sikkim, Sri Lanka, and Tibet; Southeast Asia: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar/Burma, Singapore, and Thailand). There is also an index for anyone who wishes to investigate themes such as art, meditation, nuns, pilgrimage, or texts, to name only a few possibilities. My sense is that it will be with the use of these varied listings and indices, and in the light of particular interests, that the scholar and student will access the stories, bypassing and perhaps being bemused by the overall categories into which this kaleidoscope of stories has been organized by the editors.

Each of the four sections has its own introduction, followed by individual case studies that include a brief profile of the subjects under consideration. This was something I would have liked more of, rather than scholarly filters. It is striking from the index just how many entries there are on art. The front of the book features the leading Korean wood sculptor Chan-soo Park at work, who is described by Jy Lee in "Carving Playful Buddhas" (p. 173), found in the section on "Looking Outward." It is a pity, in light of the importance of art in the portrayals, that there are not more illustrations of the work and activities of these interesting modern Buddhists. However, this lack is often a matter of the costs of publishing, particularly of illustrations.

Overall, this is an exciting, stimulating, and challenging volume that deserves widespread use. It picks up the challenge of what modernity and post-modernity—characterized by change, choice, and complexity—mean. In their introduction to the final section of the book (p. 157), the editors invoke David McMahan's excellent characterization of Buddhism as "increasingly transnational and protean, incorporating elements from various cultures and forming unique hybrids that then circulate around the globe by means of literature and traveling teachers."