Towards a Transcultural Historiography of Buddhism's Asian Expansion and its Importance in Understanding the Situation of Modern Buddhism*

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Abstract: Buddhism's successful trans-Asian pilgrimage has provided an inspiring vision of the cosmos and compelling spiritual practices, while also providing the means for householders securing worldly prosperity. Part I outlines a composite view of Buddhist expansion and intercultural adaptation, seeking a model of how its doctrines, institutional economics, and ritual activities effected the Buddhist 'conquest' of East Asia. Part II brings this holistic perspective to the present day. The past five hundred years have brought a series of crises to Buddhist Asia: the decline and fall of kingship and the disruptive imperial effects on national economies. Because most prescriptions for political action assume the intervention of a king, Buddhist societies now lack guidance from their sacred tradition. The paper highlights the rise of householder organizations and iso-

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lated monastics across Asia attempting 'to do the work of kings'. It notes how these efforts have been largely catastrophic, as seen in the rise of intolerant Buddhist nationalism(s), ethnic fratricide, and civil war. These reveal the failure to achieve the ideal of tolerant and compassionate polities. The paper ends by citing initiatives showing the vitality of new and innovative Buddhist organizations.

Keywords: monastic economy; Buddhist institutions; merchants; ritual; pragmatic Blessings; spiritual conquest; householder; saṅgha

> The intellectual ought to be someone absorbed in the attempt to know what is real and what is unreal. For his job is the maintenance of an adequate definition of reality. C. Wright Mills[1]

> Buddhism in medieval China was a religious movement, its essential characteristic. ... Yet it found expression in a broad reorganization of the social sphere. Buddhism in China had its faithful, its debtors, and dependents; for the laity the monasteries were at once granaries, treasuries, and places from which religious [ritual] power emanated. This linkage between ... the religious and the commercial, was concretely realized within those urban and village communities that were the parishes of Buddhism. Jacques Gernet[2]

> The destruction, exploitation, and transformation of the natural world on a colossal scale is not the sole preserve of northern European men fueled by Protestantism, capitalism, or empire building; Rather, Asian men and women, fueled by Buddhism and its prosperity ideology and empire building, did much the same thing, and they did so long before the rise of modern Europe. Johan Elverskog[3]

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1 Mills, 'On Knowledge and Power', 717

2 Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, xv–xvi.

3 Elverskog, *The Buddha's Footprint*, 117.

This article has two parts. The first focuses on the need to (re-) centre the history of Buddhism in its diffusion across Asia on institutions and economics. Recognizing the broad range of ritual services, cultural practices, and political factors that defined Buddhist tradition by the start of its second millennium, it is important to see its successful domestication also as contingent on environmental factors that produced massive ecological transformations across East Asia. To specifically address the theme of the conference, tracking the paradigm shifts in the study of 'the transmission and transformation of Buddhism across modern Asia', Part II explores how premodern Buddhist traditions have provided meagre resources to guide its communities in facing contemporary challenges. It underlines the need to find new ways of enculturating the classical moral ideals.

Introduction: The Buddhist Patterns of Missionizing/ Colonization/Conquest

Buddhism found acceptance in many kinds of societies across Asia, from nomadic communities to urbanized polities, from intensive rice-growing tropical zones to the vast grasslands of northern Asia; and from the Arabian Sea, across Central Asia and the Himalayas, to the Pacific Ocean; from sea level to the highest human settlements on earth. Enumerating central reasons for this religion's successful trans-Asian pilgrimage, and for understanding why the masses of householders have taken refuge in the triratna... taking on these issues necessitates nuanced and multi-level explanation, seeking interconnections.

Buddhist doctrines provided inspiring vision(s) of the cosmos, especially its teaching that the universe has a karmic/moral foundation; its monastic exponents taught and organized for their local devotees a panoply of spiritual experiences (for *both* householders and virtuosos) through myriad types of meditation designed to lead individuals forward on the long road to enlightenment. There were also practices designed for individuals to thrive in the karma-based world. Buddhist life focused on merit-making, both for the pragmatic blessings of the

present lifetime, as well as for helping householders make spiritual progress in taking better rebirths, especially as a human and in the heavenly realms.

Buddhist ritual traditions provided the means for householders to cure personal illnesses, counter epidemics, help crops thrive, or make rain fall (or stop); by the year 500, Buddhist ritual technology had expanded to include myriad practices designed to strengthen individuals and communities.[4] Everywhere the tradition existed, there were texts that recorded how the Buddha and bodhisattvas revealed recitations and encouraged refuge in amulets to keep homes secure and travellers safe, whether at sea or moving in a caravan.[5] The vast pluralism in Buddhist forms of praxis reflects the tradition's lack of any strong institutional source of authority across Asia; no organization set universal cultural norms, such as those of canon, philosophical interpretation, monastic procedures, ritual tools and praxis, material culture, sacred art production, and so on. Buddhists showed extraordinary creativity and compassion in the transcultural work of materializing and domesticating its traditions for householders and monastics, and as these traditions could be integrated in diverse con-

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[4] Two important explorations of Asian religions, particularly Buddhism, from the pragmatic/blessings perspective can be found in Reader and Tanabe, *Practically Religious*. The recent studies of Buddhism in contemporary Thailand (McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost*) and Myanmar (Patton, *The Buddha's Wizards*) have demonstrated the centrality of Buddhist ritual in Theravāda communities today. This scholarship demonstrates the need to re-imagine the so-called Theravāda as in any way more 'simple' or 'pure' than any other tradition of Buddhism. Another groundbreaking study pursues the clear evidence of ritualism in the most ancient India monuments and art in the catalogue edited by John Guy for the exhibition Tree and Serpent: Early Buddhist Art in India in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, held in Fall 2023 (Guy, *Tree and Serpent*). Huntington, in 'Lay Ritual in the Early Buddhist Art' explicates how to 'read' and 'decode' ritualism in Buddhist art, as do studies by Vidya Dehejia ('The Collective and Popular Basis of Early Buddhist Patronage' and *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*).

[5] Authoritative discussions on this topic are found in, e.g., Tambiah, 'Buddhism and This-Worldly Activity' and Strickmann, 'The *Consecration Sūtra*'.

texts, from villages to cities and, on the macro scale, in the cultural life of nations.[6]

From its inception, Buddhism achieved broad support due to its doctrinal and institutional flexibility. This distinctive characteristic is based, in part, on the essential Buddhist belief that both individuals and societies have a broad range of differences; since individuals possess different karmic backgrounds, especially in different levels of intelligence, moral character, and spiritual capacity, diversity of the Dharma as a 'medicine' for suffering was natural. Over the centuries, its monastic and householder leaders have thereby added to the breadth of praxis traditions as they faced the challenges of enculturating the young, attracting elders and affluent donors, drawing new monastic recruits to the saṅgha, and managing to help members cope with life's challenges, especially the crisis of death. Because a human spiritual hierarchy exists, it has been normative from antiquity onward for Buddhists to fashion a broad menu of traditional merit-making and ritual praxis in order to engage all types of devotees.

Like all world religions, Buddhism is multivocalic. Its leaders thereby had extraordinary flexibility in adapting the tradition to diverse local societies and varying cultural circumstances.[7] Sources record that rulers across Asia were drawn to support Buddhism, and for many reasons: its emphasis on individual morality and karma causality promoted social stability;[8] its appeal to women, especially at court, proved consistent and often strong from South and Central

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[6] A constant feature of life for a Buddhist householder is the lifelong wish to make merit (Skt. *puṇya*, 'good karma') and this transcultural reality focused attention on institutions and recurring monastic donation programs.

[7] The Mahāyāna norm of *upāya* was especially productive of creative leadership in many religious domains, largely in the work of monastics and patrons who led Buddhist institutions across the region. The Vinayas show the clear pathways of Buddha and saṅgha adapting to new or unusual circumstances, as Schopen has shown through sampling this literature with consistent originality and historical insight.

[8] A classic study of karma, merit-making, and belief in Sri Lankan society is found in Obeyesekere, 'Theodicy, Sin, and Salvation'.

Asia to China; and how respected monastics bestowed legitimization on rulers. Perhaps most importantly, the tradition offered a panoply of rituals[9] designed to secure protection, healing, and prosperity.[10]

As Buddhism spread beyond its region of origin, it quickly developed further in cultural breadth and organizational scope. Three facts about the tradition are pivotal to understanding its pan-Asian history:[11] first, most Buddhists were householders; second, its leaders, both monastics and householders, were free to creatively and effectively adapt the tradition to its distinctive East Asian milieus; and third, there were lucrative benefits due to its dynamic environmental impact across the landscapes.

A comprehensive transregional historiography of Buddhism also requires attention to how the webs of Buddhist monasticism and mercantile trade created new networks through which ideas, commodities, and people circulated.[12] Only if these historical variables are accounted for holistically can scholars explain 'the strange and fascinating phenomenon of the conquest of a great culture by a great religion'.[13] Two points in this matrix need fuller consideration

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[9] The key evidence for the centrality of ritual service in Buddhist communities traditions is found in the ethnographic accounts of Buddhism focusing on specific (if differentially defined) 'communities'. (The citation list of this literature is too voluminous to include here. A web site stemming from a 2022 NEH Summer Institute, 'Ritual Arts of Hinduism and Buddhism', is being created to assemble broadly-defined ethnographies/anthropological case studies of Buddhist communities globally according to geographical/political regions and other categories. See 'Ritual Arts in Hinduism and Buddhism'.

[10] Recent important examples are Tanabe, 'Chanting and Liturgy'; van Schaik, *Buddhist Magic*, esp. 1–15 and 43–68; Guy, *Tree and Serpent*, 93–95.

[11] Although these observations seem commonplace and obvious, I find it useful to remind my scholar-colleagues in Buddhist studies—who are mostly text-oriented and elite-centred in their scholarship—that this broad trans-cultural definition is necessary for forming an accurate historical imagination of Buddhism in history.

[12] Ray, *Monastery and Guild*; Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China*.

[13] Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 239.

in sketching a 'transcultural historiography' of Buddhism's Asian expansion.

Buddhist Lives of Householders.

> **The Four Life Conditions [Householders should Strive for]:**
> **[1] Spreads Happiness for Oneself, Family, Community**
> [He] makes himself *happy and cheerful* ...
> he makes his mother and father, his children and wife,
> his servants and workmen, his friends and comrades
> *cheerful and happy*...
> **[2] Promotes Safety and Security**
> He makes himself secure against all possible misfortunes,
> such as by fire, water, the king, a robber, an ill-disposed person ...
> And takes steps for his defense and makes himself secure...
> **[3] Offerings/Donations to humans, hungry ghosts, *devatā*.**
> He makes the five-fold offering (*bali*):[14]
> to relatives, to guests, to the king,
> and to hungry ghosts and the gods (*devatā*)...
> **[4] Supporting Authentic Religious Seekers**
> He offers gifts to all such recluses and brahmins...
> who are bent on kindness and forbearance, who tame... the one self...

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[14] A useful discussion of the range of meanings this conveyed, from material gifts to respectful service to paying taxes, is found at Dhammika, 'Offerings, the Fivefold'. This five-fold offering likely represents the Buddhist alternative to the 'Five Great Sacrifices' originating in Vedic Hinduism, the *pañcamahāyajña*. (This is paradigmatic for how Buddhist culture was part of the 'Indic culture region', with all its sub regional variants.) The brahmanical ritual listing endures into the modern Indic languages today: 'The five *yajña* or Oblation-services; viz. *dēvayajña (deities), bhūtayajña (ghosts),* or *brahmayajña/ṛṣiyajña (saints)*, *pitṛyajña (patrilineal ancestors), manuṣya yajña (people)*...' Marathi example edited from Padmanji, *A Compendium of Molesworth's Marathi and English Dictionary*, s.v. '*pañcamahāyajña*' पंचमहायज्ञ. The Pāli texts cited are sources showing that doing rituals was part of the Buddha's tradition from the beginning.

> and for such gifts obtains the highest result:
> resulting in happiness [here] and [merit] leading to heaven.
> *Aṅguttara Nikāya* VII, 75-6[15]

Scholars in Buddhist studies have not yet fully explored the history of so fundamental a question as how the tradition was lived by the great majority of disciples who were not literati but householders. Most Buddhists were less interested in nuanced interpretations of the 'Four Noble Truths' or the subtlety of śūnyatā doctrine, and much more concerned with achieving the 'Four Life Conditions' (quoted above)—achieving happiness for all one's family and associates, security from dangers, the ability to make effective offerings to supernatural beings, and the prosperity enough to support virtuous monks and ascetics... and at life's end through merit (earned or transferred), to be eligible for heavenly rebirth. Since scholars have sampled predominantly elite discourse and virtuoso spiritualty, this has impaired Buddhist Studies from getting beyond a first draft of history and still skews the general public's understanding of the tradition.

One central aspect of Buddhism commonly misunderstood is evident in contemporary discussions of ecology and religion, and the common belief that Buddhism was from its beginning a 'pro-environmental religious tradition'.[16] It is likewise wrong to imagine that 'good Buddhists' throughout its history all renounced 'this worldly' objects/goals, or that the faith's historical legacy was the promotion of an anti-materialistic culture among householders in their approach to life. This was never true in South Asia, and there is a clear record of Buddhist traditions in China being built by affluent householders and thriving on its considerable institutional wealth: a 'monastic treasury' built from the resources accumulated

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[15] See Thera and Bodhi trans., *Numerical Discourses*, 98.

[16] This is not to ignore how in the last century Buddhist doctrines have been applied to address humanity's need to 'think ecologically' or that some Buddhist institutions and intellectuals have been important actors in resisting environmental destruction.

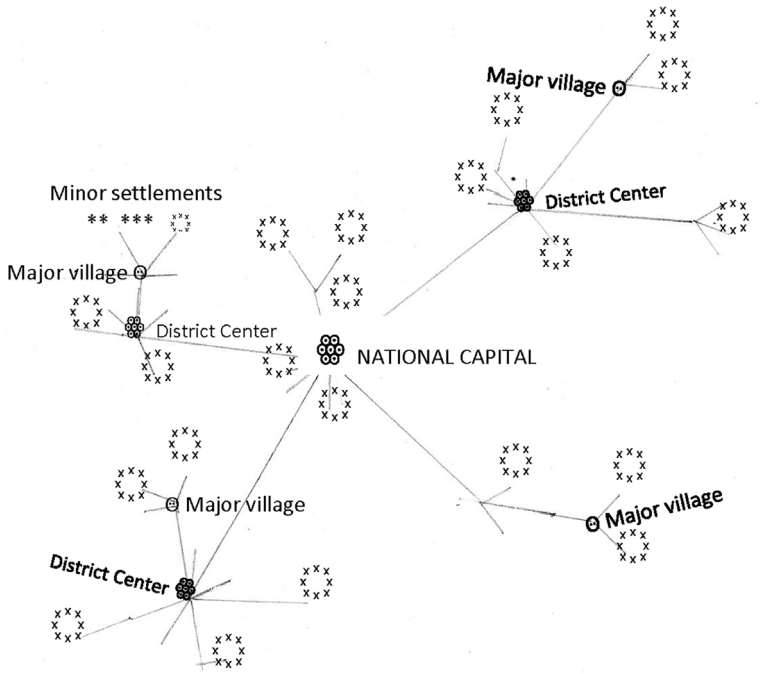

FIG. 1 The Galactic Network of Buddhist Institutional Expansion. Image by Todd Lewis.

through monastic landlordism, donations, and lending.[17] The tradition indeed expanded through its monastic and temple institutions exploiting natural resources. Expansion of Buddhism's presence was part of its tradition's missionary DNA, and the dynamism of spreading the Dharma led its monastic institutions to extend their networks to their frontiers.[18] Figure 1 maps the pattern practice of monasteries building their lineages (Skt. *parampara*), posting monks to regions closer to the wilderness or where there was not yet a Buddhist pres-

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[17] Schopen, 'The Business Side of a Buddhist Monastery', 120.

[18] As polities were pressed beyond the wet rice-growing valleys into contingent mountain terrain, they typically met with resistance by the independent tribal groups (For examples, see Lewis, 'Himalayan Religions in Comparative Perspective', 40; Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 1–40.

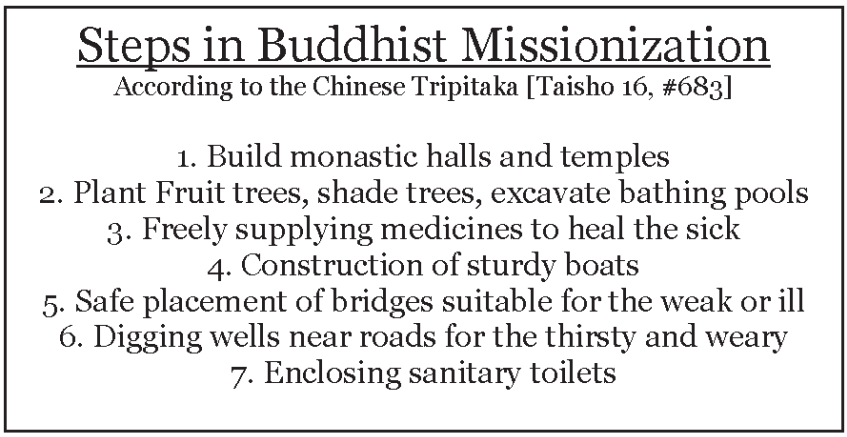

FIG. 2 Textual Injunction for Institutions pursuing Buddhist Altruism. Image by Todd Lewis.

ence. This outward push gave the faith a consistent dynamic to grow and expand its domains. Note how a text in the Chinese Buddhist Canon, echoing Indic precedents (a passage in the Pāli Canon and Nāgārjuna's *Suhṛlekha*),[19] specifies the recommended practices of monks establishing new outposts of the saṅgha. (See Figure 2.)

It is important to focus on the special, frequent attention that the Buddha directs in praise of householder donors,[20] especially the bankers, merchants, and aristocrats who played pivotal roles in building monasteries and gardens for the saṅgha, as well as in sponsoring rituals and festivals.[21] The transcultural historiography of Buddhism in all societies can track the exigencies and variables affecting this simple exchange: monastic institutions and householders. It is the economic foundation of Buddhism in any society; at the very least, the community must provide life support for the monastics, and sustain

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[19] The former is from the *Samyutta Nikaya* I, 33. Both cited at Dhammika, 'Hospitality'.

[20] For example, Strong, 'The Transforming Gift'; Schopen, 'The Business Side of a Buddhist Monastery', 121.

[21] Schopen, 'Taking the Bodhisattva into Town', 299–311.

the temple/monastic dwellings necessary for their subsistence.[22] The success of Buddhism in any society could be measured by the scale and vibrancy the of the donation merit-making tradition,[23] and how this

[22] Such is the uneven state of disciplinary approaches in the field, that in the nearly two centuries of Buddhist Studies, there has never been even a comprehensive survey that lists, describes and analyses the welter of monastic institutions across Asia; or the multitude of householder institutions, large and small, that have supported the monasteries and charities, and have orchestrated the yearly calendar of local cultural performances—rituals, annual festivals, pilgrimages. Sometimes these had an economic side (maintaining a common fund that members could borrow from) and some, often according to caste or occupational membership, that orchestrated important rituals (life cycle, especially death; annual festival traditions.) It is nearly certain that devotional musical groups were common in Buddhist communities across Asia from the beginning. Such cooperative social groups were akin to what in modern sociology are termed 'voluntary associations'. One ancient Indic group was called the *goṣṭhi*, a broad term that could span the economic association of a guild, or designate a musical ensemble that gathered weekly and for major festivals. These Indic householder institutions were certainly ancient and many were duplicated in East Asia as well. The positive encouragement of Buddhists forming such socio-religious groups fostered the growth of a '*dāna-puṇya* economy' wherever Buddhism spread. Householders organized to create myriad forms of cultural 'building', from temples to vihāras, pilgrimage programs or meditation initiations; kinship groups also organized to make their collective daily offerings at key monasteries and temples, and make donations to the destitute. The handling of death, from last rites to afterlife ritualism, was a universal concern that required the organization of multiple groups (priests, musicians, *ghat* workers) to do rightly in Buddhist ritual terms; this is also universally the time when families devastated by loss need their kin and community to support them. Many castes in the Newar Buddhist community of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, where I have researched, have a very strong and enduring tradition of handling death through social groups, the *śi* or *sanāḥ guthi*. The householder death institution is also likely to date back to the first centuries of Buddhism.

[23] In a 2019 museum exhibition, Kim and Lewis focused on ritual objects from Nepal, as documented in the catalogue, *Dharma and Punya: Buddhist*

puṇya-dāna economy underwrote the workings of the local Buddhist cultures. The ledger would tally the costs of sustaining the monastic institution(s), as well as the income earned by monasteries; it would also record what householders donated to other Buddhist institutions to promote education, arts, festivals, and scholarship. The work of Buddhist culture is, in the end, the enculturation of the tradition, in some measure adapting to the times, and ensuring that the *śāsana* survives into future. The Buddhist saṅgha is the most long-standing of any still-surviving human social institution; its formulae for success certainly worked and still show a vibrant adaptive ability.[24]

Vinaya texts praise householders who used business acumen to further the tradition by earning material wealth for it, and they *required* monks to establish sound, profitable economic practices.[25] In concert with monastic leaders, it was Buddhist entrepreneurs across Asia who, as agents of donated land holdings, extended the saṅgha's ownership of croplands, orchards, and rental properties. This monastic landlordism led monk-managers and enterprising business-oriented devotees to transform the natural world (esp. cutting forests, creating croplands and plantations). Funds deposited into monastic treasuries were turned into individual or community karmic capital, and the proceeds from lending these deposits at interest supported the whole range of Buddhist activities, from building projects and charities, to an active calendar of ritual/festival events.[26] As more land was cultivated, croplands expanded and populations grew. As

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Ritual Art from Nepal. See Figure 6 for a diagram of this exchange.

[24] The creation and mission of two relatively new householder institutions, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation and the sponsor of this conference, the Glorisun Global Buddhist Network, are indicative of Buddhism's vitality now in global scope.

[25] Schopen, 'The Business Side of a Buddhist Monastery', 121.

[26] The lucrative Buddhist devotional economy (monasteries/merchants selling supplies, artisans making images) encouraged vast ritual creativity and in traditions directed to householder needs, some of them in conducting ritual events. The profits from this funded further expressions of Buddhist tradition, while enriching the Buddhist artists and businessmen.

Gernet summarizes the scale of this development, 'The total power of the monasteries over part of the peasantry, a constant feature of the history of Buddhism in China, was especially apparent in the former regions of colonization ... The "*saṃgha* households" [families of land-bound serfs tied to cultivate lands donated] were a central model for a particular type of Buddhist colonization.'[27] The expansion of Buddhism thus abetted the expansion of rice cultivation and wealth, a prosperity multiplier for both.[28] Close monastery connections to merchants and trade also contributed to Asia's urbanization, as cities were the settings in which Buddhism especially thrived.

Buddhist Leaders: Monks and Merchants

> Buddhism in other words was good for business, and invigorated a whole sector of the Chinese economy. [Many monasteries] wished their assets to yield profits, they sought access to ...the markets. There they owned the shops which they rented out and on whom they doubtless rendered a percentage of sales. And there they also operated loan stalls.[29]

The transcultural historical pattern of Buddhism's socio-political existence over the centuries must highlight how Buddhist patrons, institutional practices, and ritual performances served in an interlocking manner to implant and sustain Buddhism across Asia.[30] This was always inflected by the shifting realities of relationship(s) with rulers and the ruling class.

As Buddhist merchants came to dominate Eurasian trade[31] (and

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[27] Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 105

[28] Elverskog, *The Buddha's Footprint*, 95.

[29] Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 168.

[30] e.g. Cabezon, *Tibetan Ritual*; Lewis, 'A History of Buddhist Ritual'; Holt, *Buddhist Ritual Cultures*; and a Chinese case study in Yü, 'The Ritual of Great Compassion Repentance', 270–80.

[31] For an overview of Buddhist merchants and their prominence in the tradi-

FIG. 3 Monks and Householder, Painting in Tabo Monastery, Himachal Pradesh, Eleventh Century. Photo by Todd Lewis.

in regions where their marketing moved out into the sparsely-populated frontiers), they spread both basic teachings and its prosperity ideology.[32] As they raised funds to build new monasteries, the system of monastic trade flourished and spread further. Ever in need of merit, wealthy householders everywhere were eager to donate land as well as to found and sustain new Buddhist monasteries and other

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tion, especially narratives, see Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts*, 50–54.

[32] Elverskog uses this apt term in a Buddhist context for the first time, to my knowledge. It is aptly adapted from the concept of 'prosperity theology' that is strong in contemporary American Protestantism. See Lewis 'The Anthropological Study of Buddhist Communities', 320–27. I am following Johan Elverskog's line of argument in the articulation of this theme.

institutions dedicated to praxis. This dynamic of Buddhist expansion pushed economic development, deforestation, and environmental transformation.[33] Rooted in the soil of acquired lands/labourers, and funded by a multitude of business enterprises, the saṅgha expounded the missionary Dharma as its trader patrons expanded Asian economies in transformative ways.

As part of this expansion, Buddhist leaders adopted 'skilful means' in achieving its own acceptance, and at times orchestrated the spiritual conquest of indigenous traditions. Buddhist doctrine from antiquity easily handled the relationship with deities or other supernaturals (ghosts, demons, vampires, etc.) in any local society: the transcultural pattern here is that local deities serve as either protectors of the Buddha/Dharma/saṅgha or were subdued by Buddhist deities and/or the saṅgha's ritual powers.[34]

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[33] Elverskog, *The Footprint of the Buddha*, 97. This dynamism also reveals the problems Buddhism faced historically when there was a downturn or disruption in the economy due to the actions of rulers, the chaos of war, or civil strife.

[34] In scholarly treatment of what constitutes 'Dharma' as one of the three refuges (*triśāraṇa*) or three jewels (triratna) in the Buddhist tradition, the standard scholarly focus has been on its meaning as the Buddha's 'Teachings' or 'Doctrines'. Reflecting the philological text-focused training of most modern scholars and their commitment to the exegesis of those texts dealing with the panoply of philosophical doctrines, this habitual practice of confining the interpretation of Dharma as only doctrine has had the effect of delimiting the understanding of what typical householders characteristically took refuge in as devotees. A transcultural historiography of Buddhism would insist on broadening the definitional range of what Dharma means as *Buddhavācana* by highlighting texts in which the Buddha speaks to reveal ritual practices and their powers. Prominent in this popular domain are *paritta*/*rakṣā* formulae disclosing special words (mantras and dhāraṇīs) that, when chanted precisely, generate both transcendental and pragmatic blessings. What is revealed in these formulae is also the Dharma, not as doctrinal exposition, but as specific actions and uttered sounds that give devotees access to the powerful supernatural forces available in the Buddhist universe. For most householders as well as for many monastics, rituals and recitations have been more important resources than the philosophical texts in the monastic li-

What is meant by Buddhist 'spiritual conquest' is clearest and most dramatic in East Asia's religious geography: Buddhists built their sanctuaries right on the top of mountains that were originally associated with residing indigenous deities.[35] While it was significant and important that Buddhist intellectuals creatively harmonized its moral teachings with Confucian principles and elements of Daoism,[36] it was even more important to many more people how its monk-practitioners recurringly performed rituals to generate and spread benevolent power when they acted for the common good: to subdue demons, please local deities, make rain, stop epidemics, or cure individuals.[37]

At the major urban monastic institutions, merchant leaders working with monks made monastery temples shining devotional spectacles as well as—through its lending programs, warehousing goods, and shop rental properties near monastic temples—vibrant centres of

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braries. For them, taking refuge in the Dharma was less about embracing complex doctrinal beliefs and more about seeking protection from epidemics and other worldly dangers that recurrently struck communities in the pre-modern world. Ritual dharma words compassionately revealed by the Buddha were gifted to benefit individuals, families, communities, nations. The refuge of mantras and dhāraṇī become even more prominent in Mahāyāna Buddhism, one factor underwriting the tradition's extraordinary success in pan-Asian history. Stories abound of great monks using this 'technology of the sacred' to cure or make it rain, pivotal acts that opened the door to Buddhism's acceptance and expansion. The sheer number of individual apotropaic manuscripts copied such as the *Pañcarakṣā* (e.g. Mevissen 'Transmission of Iconographic Traditions', 424; Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts*, 123–29) support the proposition that rituals were at the centre of Buddhism throughout history. By decentering philosophical discourse and scholasticism as the imagined centre of Buddhism, and scaling up the material, praxis-protective, and institutional ritual traditions, Buddhist Studies can finally get beyond the first draft of Buddhist history oversampling elite practice and philosophy. Seeing the reality of Dharma as a source of power and the popularity of taking refuge in Buddhist ritual practices underlines this historical desideratum.

35 Naquin and Yü, *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*, 156, 174.

36 Gregory, *Tsung-mi and the Sinification*, 279–94.

37 Strickmann, 'The *Consecration Sūtra*'.

FIG. 4 Portraits of patrons at a Buddhist shrine, Nepal. Photo by Todd Lewis.

commerce. Householders, especially bankers, caravan traders, weavers, and a variety of artisans typically formed 'collective patronage groups' to build monuments, supply them with images, and create/maintain charities.[38]

Monasteries and markets were symbiotic, as expressing devotion and earning merit guided the life of Buddhist communities. It is true that this 'web of Buddhist monasticism' created connected centres

[38] Dehejia, 'The Collective and Popular Basis of Early Buddhist Patronage', 100–11. The inscriptions inscribed in stone and metal are important but under sampled sources of understanding Buddhism 'on the ground'. Unfortunately, as with its institutions, there has never been an attempt to gather and analyse the cumulative tradition of Buddhist inscriptions from South and Southeast Asia to East Asia.

of doctrinal and ritual expertise. But they also served additional functions: nodes of local banking and economic industry; employers of monastic artists, architects, and builders; players in transregional trade networks; and centres of expertise on crops, irrigation knowledge, and trade practices. The history of Buddhism across its successful Asian diaspora, including the Sinification of Japan and Korea, must take into account the dynamic economic and environmental impact that its introduction entailed, and both document and compare the monastic and householder institutions that organized the tradition. The transcultural history of Buddhism must focus on these as primary factors.

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The spread and successful domestication of Buddhism in China is an extraordinary fact of Asian history and it has been a complex phenomenon.[39] There are a few virtuoso monks who trained a tiny spiritual and academic elite, and they inspired the devotion of their communities through instruction in the basic teachings. Another part of this inspiration was the ritual expertise of resident monastics, a few of whom were typically medical and ritual healers. Most monks performed daily rituals[40] for the pragmatic benefit of their communities. Mahāyāna Buddhists were also drawn to regular devotions to the celestial bodhisattvas, as commoners came to the monasteries and their temples, drawn by sculptures and paintings of surpassing beauty and to the rituals directed to enhance both their spiritual lives and material well-being.

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[39] For a pioneering study of a material focus for understanding Buddhism in Chinese history, see Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*.

[40] These include chanting mantras for every problem, including the summoning and worshipping the ever-compassionate celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas; fire rituals; healing rites; exorcisms; land/building/image dedication/spiritual empowerment. The pre-eminent ritual traditions across Asia are focused on death and the mourning period (e.g. Cuervas and Stone, eds., *The Buddhist Dead*).

FIG. 5 Theravāda monks tying protective thread from paritta ritual to householders in Sri Lanka. Monks throughout the Buddhist world distribute threads imbued with blessings and healing powers to householders. Photo by Todd Lewis.

The Dharma reached the masses who visited the monasteries to hear skilled preachers and storytellers;[41] their narratives taught householders to understand the world through karma doctrine and inspired their need to unceasingly make merit. Art served the faith in localizing the divine presence, conveying Dharma doctrines, and providing meditational focal points, all in myriad forms. With these precepts, practices, and institutional precedents, Chinese Buddhists spread the faith to its cultural frontiers in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. 'Sinification' that was institutionally spread through Buddhist monasticism must be understood with this multifactor complexity in mind.

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[41] Important studies are by Drewes, 'Dharmabhāṇaka in Early Mahāyāna', 331–72; Gummer, 'Listening to the Dharmabhāṇaka'; Mair, *Painting and Performance*, chapter 1.

Part II: Buddhism in a King-less World

> The need to study environmental history... is self-evident. Environmental factors operated beyond single cultures and regions even in early times, with the spread of epidemics, the diffusion of agricultural innovations, and the movement of human populations.
>
> J. Donald Hughes[42]

The past five hundred years have brought a multilayered and interlinked series of crises to Buddhist Asia: the decline and fall of kings/emperors throughout the Buddhist world (in all countries but Thailand and Bhutan), the forceful imposition of colonial rule by foreigners, the imperial quest for wealth that disrupted local economies and impoverished the traditional elites, and the confrontation with Christian missionaries who aggressively criticized Buddhism while seeking the conversion of colonized populations.[43]

The Buddhist response to these crises has been scattered and, at times, troubling. Since it is culture that guides communities, it has been a problem that most of the tradition's discourses and prescriptions for Buddhist political action have been based upon textual traditions that assume the active presence and periodic intervention of a just, Dharma-supporting king. This role was articulated in ancient times by its literati composing accounts of early patron, Aśoka. Kingship was foundational to the tradition's survival in most polities, especially in ensuring the saṅgha was protected and that its members were living according to the Vinaya. Kings are expected to 'purify the saṅgha' when monastics fail to live by their own rules.[44]

Buddhist narratives (*jātaka*s and *avadāna*s) were the key working

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[42] Hughes, *The Ends of the Earth*, 289–99.

[43] Of course, Buddhist modernizers learned a great deal from the missionaries, from modern technology such as printing to new cultural products such as pamphlets.

[44] This pattern extended from the king in a national capital to governors in regional provinces and headmen in rural villages.

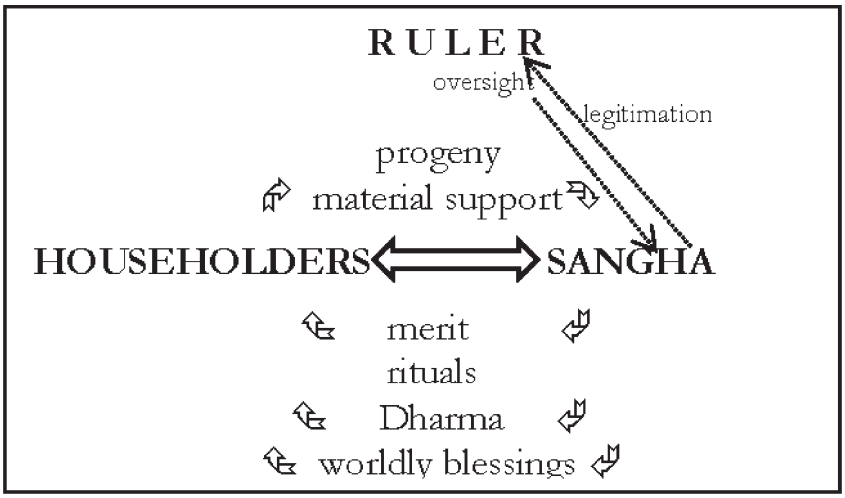

FIG. 6 Exchange in Buddhist Societies. Image by Todd Lewis.

doctrinal texts that most preachers memorized, taught, and copied. Many monastics could read the texts preserved in classical Sanskrit or Pāli, or from the Chinese of Tibetan canons. (These were a vast resource for sermons given by monks on *Uposadha* days.) In these story narratives, kings are frequently the central characters in tales teaching moral lessons, underlining how rulers and ministers are important moral actors and exemplars.[45] There is in fact a recurring discourse in these sources that warns kings (and their subjects!) about the dangers kings can pose to society if they ignore Buddhist morality and especially if their rule endangers the common good. Such narratives describing scenarios when kings undermine the lives of their subjects spare no detail on enumerating the long torments in hell that will befall the evil, unjust, or genocidal ruler.[46]

Buddhist kings are also instructed to be the first among donors, and to demonstrate the great generosity of a Dharma *Rāja* ('just king'); a ruler can aspire to be called a bodhisattva through building

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[45] e.g. Rotman, *Thus Have I Seen*; Appleton, *Narrating Karma and Rebirth*; Lewis, '*Avadānas* and *Jātakas* in the Newar Tradition'.

[46] Lewis, 'Buddhism: The Politics of Compassionate Rule', 233–56.

monasteries, endowing properties with lands to support them, enforcing monastic norms, and protecting traditional endowments.[47] A king who perpetually renews the material wealth of the monastic institutions can expect praise and legitimation from saṅgha leaders; his polity will in return benefit from the work of monastic-preachers who instruct the citizens in moral living and monastic-ritualists who perform regular rituals to protect the nation and its rulers.

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Over the last century, modern Buddhist polities have experienced the disruption of the complex and beneficial exchanges between rulers and monastics. Its leaders have faced unprecedented challenges/disruptions provoked by colonialism, independence, the global capitalist economy, and the non-Buddhist ideologies adopted by new governments (communism, socialism, secularism, and military fascism). They had as cultural resources only archaic traditional discourses on polities centred on kings/royalty and the generalized guidance on Buddhist social norms. Is there enough authoritative *Buddhavācana* to apply to a world that has been transformed in countless ways and in nations now in the hands of parliaments, politburos, and national assemblies?

Most Buddhists across Asia in the face of these serious disruptions to their tradition have concluded that the survival of the endangered Dharma (and so the saṅgha) is essential. Some have drawn modern adherents (householders and monastics) to embrace a variety of what can be called ethnic political Buddhism(s) . Ignoring the Buddha's instruction to spread the Dharma in all directions and accept people with diverse linguistic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, modern leaders have created recurring crises by implementing policies favouring only Buddhists or one ethnic group; some pursued policies contrary to Buddhist ideals (compassion, justice), or failed to protect and preserve Buddhist institutions.

With the avalanche of crises and new winds of change brought

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[47] Reynolds, 'The Two Wheels of *Dhamma*', 1–32.

into modern Asia, Buddhist leaders have had to adapt to the political changes in their countries, and to reestablish or invent new channels of economic support, analogous to those that traditionally supported the faith. Some have done so on the global scale. One modern fact of transnational life is that political leaders across Asia have tried to exert greater control over the saṅgha, recognizing the monastics' power to influence the citizen-devotees, while weakening the saṅgha's autonomy.

Another common development in twentieth-century Buddhist Asia has been the rise of new householder organizations that have attempted to make up for the lack of the essential royal or state support for the tradition. In the apt terminology of H. L. Seneviratne,[48] monks and other groups in society have arisen, seeking to 'to do the work of kings'. In the modern Theravāda world, monks have entered into politics to claim the role of 'protecting the *sāsana*', the nation's Buddhist traditions, or (in their rhetoric) to save their country from perceived enemies (like non-Buddhists, foreigners in residence, minority groups, and so on). In the contemporary world, where nearly every nation's population is now multi-ethnic and multi-religious, extreme Buddhist nationalism is sowing the seeds of poisonous hypocrisy and endless troubles.

The general decline in the number of monastics across Asia has also weakened the contemporary saṅgha. This enabled ambitious monastics to exert extreme influences that in some cases, as in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, defy traditional monastic precedents and moral norms. Some of these efforts of monks or householders doing the 'work of kings' have been effective, as when Thai monasteries have addressed the suffering of AIDS victims, or Taiwanese Buddhist foundations (such as Tzu Chi) have become international responders to natural disasters. Others attempting to do 'the work of kings', however, have created catastrophes, as witnessed by the rise of intolerant Buddhist nationalism(s), and the outbreaks of ethnic fratricide and civil war.[49] These have exposed the failure of modern adherents,

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[48] Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings*.

[49] Studies of these catastrophic conflicts have gotten considerable attention

saṅgha and householders, to act collectively to achieve the canonical Buddhist ideal of tolerant and compassionate rule.

Buddhist adherents now face many questions from citizens and rulers concerning the relevance and applicability of the traditional Buddhist norms to new problems. For example, all modern countries have developed a form of (mostly) secular 'civil religion'[50] that serves to legitimate the nation's existence and policies in the minds of their citizen populations. National holidays, the arrangement of buildings and monuments in national capitals, monuments to celebrated soldiers and politicians, a common public school curriculum, and patriotic ritual practices have all been invented to elicit loyalty, induce citizens to conform to its norms (paying taxes, serving in the military), and to support its policies. Not least is to convince the young (and their parents) that their nation is worthy of their risking/sacrificing their lives to defend it.

Since impermanence affects countries and religious traditions, and the rate of change in contemporary life has increased, there is the ongoing need to adapt their institutions and religious practices to shifting political, economic, ecological, or epidemic realities. Buddhists today must exist in societies in which its classical privileged position has been diminished, the tradition's moral ideals conflict with new secular laws, and national rulers cannot so readily contribute material support to monastic and other Buddhist institutions. In short, the tradition must be adapted to survive in the modern world where it now occupies a realm vis-à-vis a nation's 'civil religion' and in which modern countries now require Buddhist citizens to show their loyalty to it. The challenge becomes acute when, for example, a government decides to treat some citizens/groups as 'enemies of the state', but Buddhists want its moral principles centred on compas-

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(e.g. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka--Ethnic Fratricide*; Holt, *Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis*).

[50] This analysis of 'American Civil Religion' introduced by the sociologist Robert Bellah a half century ago has been a topic of research and discussion until the present day. A brief attempt to define it as well as 'Chinese Civil Religion' is found in Lewis, 'Civil Religion in China'.

sion to be reflected in their governments' practices. In recent years, pro-environment 'socially-engaged' Buddhists[51] have come into conflict with governments supporting multinational corporations when they pollute or exploit their labourers.

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To conclude, the contextual factors sketched in Part I are foundational for discerning the status and development of contemporary Buddhism in every Asian society: attentive to the householder majority and their new organizations; the power of monastics and the vigour of monastery networks; changes in land tenure, taxation issues, and the aggregate wealth in the Buddhist community; the role of the economics of ritual supplies and fine art production in support of the Buddhist institutions; and querying the roles of Buddhist doctrine and activists in environmental policies. These are the transcultural realities that must be considered to capture the trans-regional challenges Buddhism faces across Asia today.

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[51] e.g., King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*.

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