

A Report on the Second Buddhist Studies Symposium at Stanford University September 7–9, 2016

This was the second such symposium. The first was held at University of British Columbia in July 2015 and a report on that event, by Donald S. Lopez was published in the [\*Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies\*, No. 11 \(2016\)](#)

The symposium was sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) with support from the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation. Ten Dissertation Fellows and one Postdoctoral Fellow attended. The mentors at the workshop included scholars who had served on the selection committee—James A. Benn (McMaster University), Lucia Dolce (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London), Stephen “Buzzy” Teiser (Princeton University), Birgit Kellner (Austrian Academy of Sciences), Donald S. Lopez (University of Michigan)—as well as Paul Harrison, John Kieschnick and Michaela Mross from Stanford University. Also attending were Ted Lipman, CEO of the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation and from ACLS Steven Wheatley (Vice-President), Andrzej Tymowski (Director of International Programs) and Elisabeta Pop (Coordinator of International Programs). The program for the symposium can be found [here](#).

The symposium opened with a roundtable discussion on “Buddhist Studies and Buddhist Practice.” As is now customary, the core of the symposium took the form of a workshop in which the Fellows presented their research to their peers and to the mentors. The workshop was organized into five sessions, each moderated by a senior scholar. The two or three presentations in each session were followed by comments from one of the mentors. Following a practice established at the previous symposium, the sessions were organized deliberately in a way that would break down any disciplinary or other boundaries. Within each session, presenters, commentators, and moderators shared no common ground in terms of regional or temporal expertise, research language, or scholarly method. The intention behind this strategy is to focus on the potential contribution of each project to the field of Buddhist Studies as a whole. The format encourages all participants to generate questions and comments that move beyond their own areas of specialist training.

Each Fellow was allotted ten minutes within their own session to talk about their research (more detailed written research reports were distributed to all participants ahead of time). The Fellows were asked to respond to two issues:

1. What were one or two key problems encountered—practical, intellectual, or in the organization of the written work? How were these problems addressed? Are some aspects still not fully resolved?

2. How does the project help us understand the condition of Buddhist studies today? What is its potential contribution to the field?

Below, we present reports on each of the presentations made by the Fellows. The reports were written by other Fellows, each reporting on a presentation in their own session, thus (again) avoiding overlaps in research interests or training and maximizing opportunities for interdisciplinary reflection. The rapporteurs were asked to comment on three aspects of the discussion.

1. Substance of the project: What did your colleague say about the project in the ten-minute presentation?

2. Discussion: What were the reactions to your colleague's project? Clarifications? Amplifications?

3. Implications: How did your engagement with your colleague's project make you think differently about your own work? About the field of Buddhist studies?

The reports have been lightly edited for style. They are in alphabetical order by name of the rapporteur.

### **Reports on the Presentations**

Linda Chhath (University of Wisconsin, Madison): *Ethics of Independence: Buddhist Cosmopolitanism in Cambodia, 1953 -1970*

Report by Kris L. Anderson

1. Substance of the project:

Linda Chhath's dissertation looks at religious and ethical ideas of the "Buddhist ethical media" as an entrance to studying the social, political and international movements between the 1950's and 1970's, examining the instrumentality of religion in directing, and the use of Buddhism as a tool in, political identity. The research considers how the work of nation-building operates in Cold War era politics in light of post-colonial views and views of Buddhism, and Third World non -alignment politics. It aims to conceptualize and connect these things and shows that in order to look at religion, one has to look at larger geopolitics.

Chhath addressed questions that arose in her research, in particular with regard to challenges involving sources—the difficulty of locating pre-War sources, their disorganization when found, the issues of incorporating unconventional sources, especially the "ethical media"—material that repackages Buddhist ethical messages and disseminates it (including film, print, photography, etc.). This approach proved fruitful and became the focus, while a second line of research, involving oral histories, was initially begun but faced obstacles. Asking important questions about a wide range of materials, the project aims to contribute by historicizing religious production as well as addressing ethical questions.

2. Discussion:

In the conversation that followed, one subject of interest concerned the scope—how to make the material come together, and how it should be organized, and whether a more specific focus was identifiable. The definition and concept of "Buddhist ethical media" was discussed, and Professor Benn suggested that it could be an organizing principle to push further beyond the immediate context to see a larger perspective on Buddhism and statecraft. Professor Lopez also spoke to the scope of the project, asking questions about which discipline it most appropriately

fits into, and whether the particular angle involving the monk Mahaghosananda, one of the producers of Buddhist ethical media in the period, might prove fruitful. Continuing with the question of unifying theme and discipline, Professor Kieschnick spoke about the possibilities of Buddhist socialism, art, planning, etc. Finally, in the response, Professor Teiser noted that post-1850's Buddhism is an open field and various approaches and ways of framing the questions can be considered, including asking what Buddhist Studies is in mid-20th century Southeast Asia.

### 3. Implications:

As highlighted by Professor Teiser's response to both of our projects, the scope and breadth of material drawn from a wide range of sources is a challenge we both face, and as with many of the conversations through the symposium, strategies for framing projects and structuring arguments were of great interest. The emphasis on methodology and research approaches in Buddhist Studies, central to all our work, was equally important.

Jin kyoung Choi (Ludwig Maximilians Universität München): *Three Sūtras in the Sanskrit Dīrghāgama Manuscript*

Report by Jack Meng-Tat Chia

#### 1. Substance of the project:

Jin kyoung Choi's dissertation is a critical edition of three sūtras in the Sanskrit *Dīrghāgama* manuscript. Her research focuses on the transliteration and annotation of three texts, as well as the compilation of supplementary tables and bibliography. Choi examines the structures of the texts and seeks to analyze the parallel paragraphs pertaining to the terms of the gradual path of practice/training. What these texts have in common are their descriptions of the gradual path that include terms such as *śīla*, *dhyāna*, and *abhijñā*.

Choi successfully defended her dissertation earlier this year and is currently revising her book manuscript for publication. In her presentation, Choi discussed some of the problems she encountered organizing and analyzing the *Dīrghāgama* texts. For instance, the inconsistent usages of the terms in two of the texts had made the task of arranging the manuscript an onerous one. Choi also highlighted the challenges comparing the scribe's errors and understanding the reasons behind these mistakes.

Choi's dissertation is a demanding editorial project that seeks to make several contributions to the field of Buddhist Studies. First, it makes the manuscript available for scholars interested in the study of Sanskrit *Dīrghāgama* manuscript. Second, Choi's research offers a comprehensive examination of the concept of "gradual path" found in the Sanskrit texts. Third, her work adds to the discussion of the compilation process of Sanskrit *Dīrghāgama*, Pāli *Dīghanikāya*, and Chinese *Dīrghāgama*.

#### 2. Discussion:

In the discussion that followed, Javier Schnake, a philologist himself, raised a question regarding the definition of "critical edition." However, neither he nor Choi were able to pinpoint a single definition of critical edition. Professor Harrison suggested the need to contextualize the production of the *Dīrghāgama* manuscripts. He also pointed out that Choi could consider discussing the use of Digital Humanities for philological studies in her book. The methodology

and techniques in digital humanities offer new ways to read and analyze manuscripts.

Professor Lopez raised a broader question: What is the “hook” in this research? In other words, must philological research always have an argument or could it be a project that focuses on textual accuracy? On the other hand, Professor Teiser pointed out the difference between the American and European philological research. Finally, the commentator, Professor Kieschnick, suggested that a close examination of the scribes could potentially offer new insights into the process, transmission, and models of manuscript production.

### 3. Implications:

To be frank, there is little similarity between my project and Choi’s. The time period of my project and hers is 2,000 years apart. Furthermore, as I was trained to study Buddhism as an historian of religions, I must confess that I knew little about philological research and the compilation process of a critical edition of manuscripts. My engagement with Choi’s project helped me better understand the philological approach to Buddhism. Her work opens my eyes to the variety of research questions and methodologies in the field of Buddhist Studies. More importantly, Choi’s research alerted me to the use of Digital Humanities in the study of Buddhism. Digital Humanities offer a new opportunity to consider how the technology can advance the field and to support a dialogue among Buddhologists across different disciplines.

Jack Meng-Tat Chia (Cornell University): *Diasporic Dharma: Buddhism and Modernity across the South China Sea*

Report by Jin Kyoung Choi

#### 1. Substance of the project:

This dissertation project focuses on the transnational religious careers of three eminent monks—Chuk Mor (竺摩, 1913-2002), Yen Pei (演培, 1917-1996), and Ashin Jinarakkhita (體正, 1923-2002). Investigating these three figures who were instrumental in the movement, exchanges, and innovation of Buddhist knowledge and institutions in the Chinese diaspora, the Fellow aims (1) to contribute to the recent literature that critiques the “colonial/Western transformation” model in the study of Buddhism and modernity in Asian societies, and reveal that overseas Chinese monks not only contributed to the creation of a hybrid Buddhist modernism, but also in making maritime Southeast Asia a center for Chinese Buddhism; (2) to bring religion into the study of Chinese diasporic networks and reveal that trans-Asian Buddhist networks enabled monks in the diaspora to reconceptualize Buddhist ideas and reconfigure Buddhist modernity in Southeast Asia.

During his ten-minute talk, the Fellow mentioned difficulties of dealing with too many sources as well as wide range of oral history interviews he came across during his research period.

#### 2. Discussion:

A large portion of questions were regarding the historical and cultural background of these religious phenomena of the target regions: the Buddhist historical background of Southeast Asia, their Taiwanese connections, the relation to post-colonial nationalism, the background of the growing number of graduate applications from Southeast Asia and the necessity of study on the micro-history or bibliography of this era. While answering these questions, the Fellow noted the lack of previous studies regarding the era of his interest. In fact, however, he decided not to

include the result of his own research on this historical background in his dissertation but to leave it as his next project.

Other interesting questions were raised regarding gender issues addressed by the three figures as well as regarding the Fellow's own evaluation of the success of these figures. The Fellow noted that many of the prominent disciples of the three are women who have taken leading and prominent positions in their tradition, and that there was a music concert dedicated to Chuk Mor praising his contribution to the Malaysian Buddhist community.

### 3. Implications:

Despite the great gap of difference between this project and my own, I have learned so much by observing his talk and the discussion along with other colleagues' sessions throughout this symposium, in which various interesting and thought-provoking questions were dynamically asked and answered.

The most inspiring moments were when there were questions and comments that project the theme in a much bigger context, for instance, a comment that the ideas of these three figures might have forged certain post-colonial nationalistic activity to a certain extent. It inspired me to think about the historical and social context of my own study from a different angle and broaden my viewpoint not only for my own understanding, but also for the interest of a broader audience in the field of Buddhist Studies.

The critical comments on his presentation skills, especially those suggesting more efficient and productive ways of utilizing Power Point during a presentation, encouraged me to think more about systematic and methodological ways of tailoring my research to appeal more to a wider audience within the field.

Wei Wu (Princeton University): *Seeking Dharma from Tibet: Indigenization of Tibetan Buddhism in Twentieth Century China*

Report by Javier Schnake

### 1. Substance of the project:

Wei Wu explores the indigenization of Tibetan Buddhism in modern China since the 1920s, based on archival research and scriptural analysis. It began with the endeavor of Chinese Buddhist intellectuals who went to Tibet to seek spiritual inspirations to revitalize Buddhism in China, in a context of nation-building and reforming religion. Wei Wu suggests that this indigenization of Tibetan Buddhism in the Chinese context involves a dialectal process of translation and interpretation, and is conceived as a succession of contacts during which new meanings are generated. It gave rise to a creative synthesis of Tibetan and Chinese elements that shapes the religious community. The shared knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism preconditioned its good reception in Chinese milieu.

Among these intellectuals, Wei Wu focus on the paradigmatic figure of Nenghai 能海 (1886—1967), a still-influential Buddhist leader who deeply studied in different Tibetan places before promoting the rise of a Tibetan Gelug lineage in southwest China. His activities allowed promulgating Tibetan Buddhist teachings among Chinese followers, by developing this lineage in China, and by producing a vast amount of translations and interpretations of Tibetan texts.

### 2. Discussion:

Comments and questions revolved essentially on the diffusion process of ideas of these

Buddhist teachings. Birgit Kellner evoked the complexity of the movement and circulation of persons through Asia, asking then for the role of Japan in this process of religious exchanges. But it seems that the choice to privilege Tibetan ideas was clearly deliberated by Chinese intellectuals, placing this tradition in high esteem and source of religious authority.

Donald Lopez stressed the reciprocal presence of Chinese and Tibetan monks within these two different traditions in history. Unlike in previous contacts, in the Republican period, the Chinese intellectuals allowed reaching new audience by their interpretative works and activities. In this climax, the transmission of these new elements was promoted by different means of publications, and interest exceeded a small circle of practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism (James Benn).

### 3. Implications

Semantically, the question of the acceptance of a term like ‘indigenization’ in the actual Chinese context was raised (John Kieschnick). It allows one to highlight the singularity of this Chinese assimilation of ideas. It was pointed out that even belonging to a Gelug lineage, a certain distance existed with the Tibetan religious authorities, making clearly of these appropriated elements some Chinese “productions”.

Finally, different scholars encouraged Wu to deepen some points that seem relevant to this work and more largely to Buddhist studies: the nature of the acceptance by the Chinese environment of these Tibetan teachings (James Benn); the place of this work within a broader Buddhist history, this situation being conceived as a singular response to modernity (Michaela Mross).

Javier Schnake (École Pratique des Hautes Études): *Dhamma through Letters: The Vajirasāratthasaṅgaha, A 16th century Pāli Text from Northern Thailand*

Report by Wei Wu

#### 1. Substance of the project

Javier Schnake’s dissertation examines the *Vajirasāratthasaṅgaha (Vss)*, a Pāli text composed in the ancient kingdom of Lanna (in the present-day North Thailand) in the sixteenth century. Based on manuscripts collected from libraries and monasteries in different regions of Southeast Asia, Schnake aims to construct a critical edition of the text and its commentary. Analyzing the text, Schnake argues for its distinct synthesis of varying topics that have so far remained largely untapped by scholars. For example, according to Schnake, its integration of *ekakkharas* (monosyllables) and the *kaṭapayādi* numbering system reflects the influence of the Sanskrit literature on Pāli compositions. The incorporation of these elements also shows the dynamic aspect of the production and circulation of Pāli literature in Southeast Asian regions.

In addition, according to Schnake, as the only known comprehensive Pāli work dealing with the *hua jai* (magic spells), the text sheds significant light on the practical dimension of Pāli literature. Schnake notes that, the use of *hua jai* are omnipresent in the Thai society and in a lesser extent in the neighboring countries. Contextualizing this popular practice in the Thai culture, Schnake found that the text’s elaboration on *hua jai* denotes that these elements are more than only spells or mnemonic codes. Instead, they are represented as an embodiment of the Pāli textual tradition. The text, in Schnake’s view, will help us to better understand the role of Pāli as a sacred language in Buddhist textual and practical traditions.

In outlining the difficulties in accessing the monasteries and libraries, Schnake draws our attention to a rich, varied, and complex body of Pāli works in Thailand, while the scholarship on Pāli literature was mainly grounded on works produced in Ceylon and Burma. As shown in his analysis of the *Vss*, the Pāli texts produced in Thailand, while delivering the fundamental teachings of the Theravāda tradition, developed distinctive features and assimilated elements from the indigenous culture. The study will make a significant contribution to scholarly study on Pāli literature in general and in particular, thereby helping us to understand the circulation of Buddhist elements in different traditions.

2. Discussion:

In the conversation, historical and methodological questions were raised, such as geographical and linguistic constraints on the circulation of the text, tracing the different versions, and comparing their different scripts. There was also some discussion about the interaction between the Sanskrit and Pāli literature. Especially, given that some elements of the text had well developed in Sanskrit tradition, how does the author assess the Sanskrit influence on the compilation of Pāli literature, and notably its conception of the letter (*akkhara*) that is at the core of the *Vss*?

3. Implications:

A wider question concerns all works pertaining to esoteric texts. In what way shall we use textual accounts to reconstruct esoteric practice in the historical context?

Xi He (Appalachian State University): *In Praise of the Buddha: Literary Design and Religious Emotions in the Lalitavistara*

Report by Matthew D. McMullen

1. Substance of the project:

Xi He joined the symposium as a recipient of a Ho Family Foundation postdoctoral Fellowship. During her tenure as a Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, she completed a book project entitled *In Praise of the Buddha: Literary Design and Religious Emotions in the Lalitavistara*. In her book, He argues that tales of the Buddha found in birth stories, biographies, poems, dramas, etc.—some of which have been included in canonical sources and some transmitted in the vernacular—had a profound impact on the development of literary culture in South Asia and were the textual foundation for later depictions of the Buddha throughout the Buddhist world. He specifically focuses on the *Lalitavistara*, a widely disseminated literary account of the Buddha's life. The rich narrative of the *Lalitavistara* was central to its popularity, and its influence can be seen from the bas-reliefs of Borobudur on the island of Java to the religious culture of Nepal.

2. Discussion:

In her talk, He discussed how the literary aesthetic of the *Lalitavistara* was also an essential component of the soteriological experience aroused by the text. The text cultivates this transformative experience by evoking the emotions of delight and joy in the reader or audience. He's emphasis on emotion, especially pleasant emotions such as joy and delight, stimulated a

lively discussion regarding the role of emotion in Buddhist soteriology. As He noted in her talk, her students were taken aback by the notion that a Buddhist text can be a source of pleasure. Buddhism is supposed to be austere and the path to liberation requires one to detach oneself from such emotions. However, He's presentation of the emotional aesthetics of the *Lalitavistara* caused several members of the audience to consider how joy and delight were factors in their own studies. Perhaps, the most consequential comment questioned whether the emotional reaction to Buddhist literature should be limited to pleasant results such as joy and proposed that the aesthetics of the text could cause negative emotions such as fear or disgust. Could these emotions also serve soteriological purposes?

### 3. Implications:

He's study of the *Lalitavistara* has at least two implications for the field of Buddhist Studies. First, we should be more flexible when categorizing Buddhist texts. We too often relegate textual traditions to specific categories such as literature, practice, or doctrine when in fact these distinctions were not necessarily made in their original context. Literary works such as the *Lalitavistara* had as much of an impact on Buddhist soteriology as doctrinal treatises. Second, He's discussion exposed a problem we all face when translating textual sources from an ancient culture. In addition to lexical and syntactical meaning, how do we translate the literary aesthetics of the text? In other words, how can we as scholars living in this modern age help our audience to engage with the intended audience of the text? By focusing on the emotional qualities of the narrative, He's approach to Buddhist literature does a service to the field in addressing this issue. I look forward to reading her book.

Matthew D. McMullen (University of California, Berkeley): *The Development of Esoteric Buddhist Scholasticism in Early Medieval Japan*.

Report by Xi He

### 1. Substance of the project:

*Treatise Distinguishing the Two Teachings of the Exoteric and Esoteric* is a pivotal text and considered the definitive exposition on the esoteric view of the Dharmakāya and its spread. It is attributed to Kūkai (774-835), the revered founder of the Shingon school of esoteric Buddhism in Japan. Matthew D. McMullen's project examines the esoteric Buddhist scholastic tradition around the *Treatise* and offers a corrective to this scholarly consensus. He argues that the image of Kūkai as a towering Buddhist intellectual was a much later development and at least one of Kūkai's major works on doctrine was actually an apocryphal text written several centuries later as a response to, or a dismissal of what was the normative explanation of esoteric Buddhism at the time, which was the Tendai view. Furthermore, the Tendai theory of Dharmakāya articulated in the writings of Annen (841-889/915) was based on Mahāyāna sūtras and treatises rather than on Kūkai's *Treatise*. And it dominated esoteric Buddhist thought until the late eleventh century, when the *Treatise* first entered the scholastic discourse.

McMullen analyzes a wide range of scriptural exegesis, sectarian polemics and debate, and interpretations of practice and ritual around the *Treatise*. His approach to esoteric Buddhism as scholastic tradition rather than a specific institution allows for a much more dynamic understanding of how Buddhist intellectuals approached specific problems such as doxography

or lineage, rather than trying to pinpoint a specific esoteric doxography or lineage. He contends that we can and should use such categories carefully, and when we talk about esoteric Buddhism, it is more helpful to clarify whose esoteric Buddhism we are talking about.

## 2. Discussion:

The questions during the discussion focused on reframing the project question and building argument and on how this study could be accessible to a broader audience. Professor Harrison and Professor Kellner suggested looking at the texts by Kūkai and Annen not in order to debunk a traditional point of view, but exploring them independently for their arguments. Ultimately, a constructive thesis will provide a solution to a problem within the tradition and important information about the doctrinal discourses at the time. Professor Mross suggested looking at the evolution of the special aspect of Kūkai veneration in a similar way as Kevin Carr does in his book *Plotting the Prince: Shōtoku Cults and the Mapping of Medieval Japanese Buddhism*.

## 3. Implications

One of McMullen's research questions was to ask how the study of Japanese Buddhism can be accessible to the broader scholarship in other regions and Buddhist traditions. Professor Teiser, Professor Kellner, and Professor Kieschnick suggested ways to broaden the arguments and make his project more accessible to a broader audience. Throughout the symposium, participants were pushed to think hard about the relevance of the projects to the broader field and broader audience in Buddhist studies and beyond.

Kamilla Mojzes (Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn): *The Fourth Zhwa-dmar-pa Incarnate: A Comprehensive Study of the Life and Work of Chos-grags ye-she dpal bzang-po (1435-1524)*

Report by Anthony Lovenheim Irwin

## 1. Substance of project:

This study is concerned with the life and works by and about the fourth Zhwa-dmar-pa incarnate, Chos-grags ye shes dpal bzang-po. The fourth Zhwa-dmar-pa was a fifteenth-to-sixteenth-century Tibetan eminent spiritual teacher with strong political ties. Mojzes has used a large collection of works by the fourth Zhwa-dmar-pa published in Beijing in 2009. Published under the title *Collected Writings* (gSung-'bum Chos-gras ye-she), this collection contains many works that were previously unpublished and difficult to access. Mojzes has made good use of the autobiography, letters, and colophons contained in this collection in order to create a full picture of the fourth Zhwa-dmar-pa's teachings, travels, and connection to important sponsors.

Working with the autobiography published in *Collected Writings*, and a biography written by one of the fourth Zhwa-dmar-pa's close disciples, Mojzes has constructed an accurate picture of the life of the lama. This has been accomplished through a line-by-line comparison of the two works to clarify gaps present in both pieces of writing.

Furthermore, information from the numerous colophons written by the fourth Zhwa-dmar-pa himself was used to fill in dates and locals missing in both works. Similarly, Mojzes has

been able to date many of the fourth Zhwa-dmar-pa's writings that are without colophons using information found in the autobiography.

## 2. Discussion:

The discussion of Mojzes' work during our symposium brought out broader themes in the study of the fourth Zhwa-dmar-pa's writings. Mojzes identified that the extant written corpus of the fourth Zhwa-dmar-pa correlates with similar oeuvres of lamas of the same time period. This somewhat typical example reveals, in great detail, the literary life of a lama, and provides historical context for the Tibetan bibliomania that defines the tradition.

Importantly, we discussed the stylistic and substantive differences between primary sources written by the fourth Zhwa-dmar-pa, including his biography, and the secondary sources written by his disciples. Secondary sources present the work of the fourth Zhwa-dmar-pa as eminently important, however, Mojzes' historical work has shown that there is not much evidence to show the influence of the writings of this particular lama. These claims of importance, as well as the fantastic elements found within his biography, contrast with the figure found in his biography—in which he explains that he is writing at the request of his sponsor, and to dispel any misconceptions about his life. Lastly, we discussed how this study of a particular individual could be connected to the larger fields of Tibetan Studies, and Buddhist Studies.

## 3. Implications:

Listening to the details and specific challenges Mojzes confronted in her research, and the subsequent discussion of her work, has helped me to look more closely at the difference between hagiography and personal reportage that I have collected in my own research concerning numerous monks. The stark contrast between the fourth Zhwa-dmar-pa's sober account of his own travels and works with the fantastic and flowery descriptions found in the writings of his disciples has brought my attention to similar discrepancies that exist in my research. It has inspired me to look at the rift between these two genres as reflecting specific contours of monastic comportment and discipleship. Furthermore, I have been inspired by Mojzes' methodology, and can see using close, line-by-line comparative textual work to clarify many of the historical discrepancies that I encounter in my own research.

Lina Verchery (Harvard University): *The Fajie Fojiao Zonghui: Rethinking Monasticism, Moral Selfhood, and Modernity*

Report by Eva Kamilla Mojzes

## 1. Substance of the project:

Lina Verchery's project posed two main challenges: the practicalities of an ethnic field study and structuring the resulting information along a valid, theoretical framework. Lina had three ideas. First, to tackle it as an interdisciplinary question: what ethnography can bring to Buddhist ethics. Is moral anthropology the best method to bring out moral insights? Second, to reframe the study along the question of how modern, humanistic Buddhism handles superstition. Third, to look at DRBA from a global perspective: to investigate transnational Buddhism within the Westernization paradigm.

## 2. Discussion:

The comments came mostly about the challenges of finding her voice and giving suggestions for further lines of inquiries, while Lina's research was also acclaimed for her dedication.

Since DRBA is a fundamentalist organization, to write about it and change how it is perceived from the outside, there is a danger that one overcompensates on the preconceived issues or, in contrast, errs in the other direction of not wanting to offend. In addition, she could consider the use of etic perspective and also utilizing her skills as a filmmaker to find her voice.

She was cautioned about terminology: the terms *Prātimokṣa* and *Śīla* cannot be readily translated as "morality."

Suggested directions to explore:

Since the research is about a regimented community, what range of morally relevant issues can this offer? What extent does it celebrate isolation from its environment? What is the question of community in a larger context? Buddhism is framed through these Buddhist environments.

How about the question of ethics: heuristics? Why would one call an experience moral?

Though Buddhist monastic regimen is codified, there are still areas for negotiation. She could make a comparison to other strong monastic examples.

Traditionalism is one response to modernity. It is not just going back to the roots, but new things develop by creative blending. DRBA is engaged in different ways with modernity, while they carry on with their emphasis on ethics. How does that relate to what academics do with those texts?

She could consider the question of isolationism and look at e.g. Amish parallels. There is always a degree of engagement with the outside world. How about the lay communities of support around the DRBA centers?

It is also a highly politically loaded subject and it would be very promising to look at it from that direction.

## 3. Implications

The insight that "construction" was the overarching theme for our seemingly disparate talks made me re-write one part in my Introductory Chapter. Lina's active engagement in her study made me think and examine how my distance and/or closeness to the research on the 4th Zhwa dmar pa influenced my line of questions and overtones of reasoning. Listening to the very diverse topics of Buddhist Studies as represented by the workshop participants made me come out of my present research "ivory tower" and consider exciting further future research topics, while this in turn also invigorated my present research activity.

Anthony Irwin (University of Wisconsin, Madison): *Building Buddhism in Chiang Rai, Thailand: Construction as Religion*

Report by Lina Verchery

## 1. Substance of the project:

Anthony Lovenheim Irwin's presentation about his project, entitled *Building Buddhism in Chiang Rai, Thailand: Construction as Religion*, began with an overview of the project's genesis: a year spent living in Chiang Rai, after which he decided to pursue an M.A. with the

intention of writing a thesis on sima space – the sanctified space around ordination halls – in Chiang Rai. His interests then shifted to modern art in Thailand, and it was while conducting PhD pre-dissertation research on this topic that he noticed many Buddhist temples under construction. This sparked an interest in practices of building. After meeting a Buddhist leader who undertook a temple construction project after receiving instructions in a vision, Irwin decided to shift his dissertation topic to practices of temple construction and their relationship to larger Buddhist cosmological ideas.

Irwin summarized his argument by stating: “The act of physical construction and renovation of Buddhist spaces and temples reveals and forges a variety of religious networks as they are elaborated in local, national, and cosmological realms. The creation of healthy communities based on virtuous action is a Buddhist felicity, and that this felicity has been situated in the specific historical and archeological context of Chiang Rai over the past 170 years has resulted in a vigorous ethic of Buddhist construction.” In other words, Irwin uses the lens of “building” to examine Buddhist ideas of community and cosmology, noting also that living amongst the archeological ruins of Chiang Rai was of central importance to the creation of local self-understanding, identity, and sense of place. This also connects with idea about rebirth. Specifically, local people rebuilding temples sites – both as financial donors and as craftspeople – understand themselves to be in fact continuing work they began in their past lives, as well as ensuring their enduring connection to the site for their future rebirths.

Irwin raised logistical questions about how best to organize his plethora of collected data, as well as regarding the integration of theoretical material about visual culture and spatial theory into his project.

## 2. Discussion:

Several symposium participants asked about the conceptual and religious difference between acts of rebuilding versus new construction, whether one is considered to be more meritorious than the other, and to what extent these categories are recognized by the people featured in Irwin’s study. Irwin noted that in Thai a single word is generally used to denote both construction and reconstruction, and that his informants did not see one activity as generating more merit than the other. Irwin added that what is more relevant to people on the ground, so to speak, is the influence of dreams and visions in inspiring building projects, as well as the perceived agency of relics, ruins, and sacred sites, such as caves, which influence the cosmological ideas about sacred space that inform temple building initiatives.

Other questions concerned the organization of the dissertation material and the method of data acquisition. Specific questions about ethnographic method and interview style arose, and Irwin detailed certain challenges in gathering information about visions from monastic informants, who as a matter of ethical propriety are not supposed to discuss such matters openly.

Questions also probed how this project will address broader geographic, political, and transnational concerns. Specifically, this centered on exploring the connection between the rural sites that are the focus of Irwin’s study and the political hub of Bangkok, which Irwin plans to do by discussing the influence of specific monastics who, while spearheading temple construction projects, acted as liaisons between these hubs. Irwin also noted that “building as a cultural sphere” extends into Laos and China, and he plans to explore these transnational continuities.

## 3. Implications:

This project aims to make several historical and theoretical contributions. First, the

dissertation hopes to offset the dearth of written materials documenting the history of Chiang Rai, although Irwin specified that his second book project would take this up in greater detail.

Building on existing work in the study of dreams and visions within Mahayana Buddhism (Irwin cited Campany and Faure), Irwin hopes to use building as a lens to understand how dreams and visionary experience – through the construction projects they inspire – can inform new models for the study of religion and society, religion and the state, and notions of art and labor. This project also promises to open a new window into the religiosity of builders, laborers, and craftspeople. As paid artisans, the religiosity of these workers involves a vocational and financial dimension. This project holds the potential to illuminate new aspects of Buddhist religiosity through the eyes of professional Buddhist artisans, who all-too-often have remained invisible in other studies of major Buddhist art and architecture. Finally, it was noted that this study of building practices might contribute to the field of Buddhist Ethics by bringing serious consideration of space, and its material and social production, into dialogue with ideas of morality, virtue, and karma.

## **Afterword**

### **Implications for the field of Buddhist Studies**

It was very encouraging to witness not only the diversity of projects and methodologies on display in the workshop but also the intellectual aspirations shown by the Ho Fellows in the discussion. Participants learned from each other and showed a strong commitment to understanding how their own work could contribute to the broader field of Buddhist Studies.

The projects presented at the workshop were at different stages, some were complete, while others were in their initial research phase. Naturally, then, participants brought a range of concerns and experiences to the workshop. The workshop was mostly devoted to dissertation research and writing, so there was much focus on the scope and breadth of projects, and the challenges of putting limits around source material. Mentors stressed the necessity of closely defining dissertation topics in terms of time, place, tradition, genre and so on, while also opening a path to the broader field of Buddhist studies. Two key themes emerged from this workshop: the tools and methods of research, and the need to place projects in context.

#### Tools and methods of research

There was considerable positive discussion about the value and nature of philology and its vital place within the field of Buddhist Studies. Fellows and mentors noted broad differences in approaches to philology in Europe and North America. Generally, there was a reaffirmation of the foundational nature of philology for the broad range of disciplines within Buddhist Studies. In addition to lexical precision, participants also pondered how to render such essential aspects as the literary aesthetics of pre-modern Buddhist texts. There were also questions about the relationship between text and practice; specifically, the ability of the scholar to reconstruct historical practice from text.

None of the projects introduced at this workshop utilised techniques of Digital Humanities, but there were indications of where tools such as mapping, network analysis and text mining would be helpful. Use of these tools across the field might provide common ground for scholars working on diverse projects, times and places.

#### Placing research in Context

A key theme that came up in our discussion was the circulation of Buddhist ideas within Asia: how did these ideas move, what are the factors that support the development of those ideas in their intellectual or practice environments. The Ho Fellows were encouraged to place their work within larger spans of Buddhist history and in dialogue with scholars of other times, places, and traditions. In particular, participants noted various ways in which Buddhist traditions encountered modernity, and explored how to put space, place, and material culture into conversation with Buddhist concepts of cosmology and morality.